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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN ADULTHOOD

BY

KAREN SVEINUNGGAARD

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ADULT, CAREER AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

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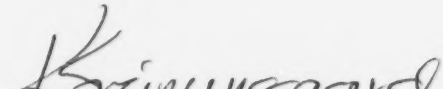

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN ADULTHOOD submitted by KAREN SVEINUNGGAARD in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF EDUCATION in ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the transformative learning experiences of six adults. In progressing through a learning process that was initiated by a critical life event, the participants experienced one of the most significant learning experiences of their adult life. Each of the participants experienced and engaged in a common process of learning that can be portrayed in six phases: disorientation; emotional/physical reaction; building connections; journey into self; reaffirmation of self; and contextual awareness.

Transformative learning within this study emerged as a social versus an individual process, involving an inter-dependent relationship between the individual and his or her social and cultural environment. The learning process and the impact experienced by the participants were embedded within the contexts in which they live, each influencing the other. An overwhelming sense emerged that this learning could not have occurred in isolation from others.

Transformative learning as experienced by the participants involved affective and cognitive components. Participants' personal journeys into self incorporated exploring and critically reflecting upon prior roles, expectations, assumptions, beliefs, feelings, values, goals, and commitments. In the process of reaffirming self, participants' meaning perspectives were affectively and cognitively transformed to become increasing more

integrated, flexible, expansive and inclusive. Additionally, participants' priorities and goals shifted to incorporate higher order values.

The impact of the critical life event and personal learning on the lives of the participants were also explored. Repercussions were experienced within six different life spheres for each participant: significant relationships; work; spirituality; health; leisure; and community. Personal relationships became a priority; work took on a sense of meaning versus a means of achieving economic rewards; a search for spiritual understanding was undertaken; emotional and physical health became a priority, represented in changed leisure emphasis; and a broader sense of community emerged.

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CHAPTER ONE

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Introduction

Literature written on critical life events &/or life transitions and their impact has grown over the past decade. Harris (1985) suggests that one of the reasons for this increasing interest may be the result of changes within the socio-cultural climate. Changes in the family structure, labour force, life expectancy, economy, and population have resulted in the need for ongoing change on the part of individuals who are attempting to cope, grow and develop. Until recently, the majority of research into this topic arose out of disciplines other than education. Adult educators are only beginning to study the learning that results from life events (Mezirow, 1991; Merriam & Clark, 1991).

Critical life events may be normative or non-normative, positive or negative, anticipated or unexpected. They are defined as any event, internal or external to the individual that is perceived as significant in his/her life. Critical life events are not necessarily limited to an isolated event at a particular time in history. They may also be seen as processes beginning before the actual event occurs and sometimes continuing well beyond the event itself. When viewed from this perspective, critical life events can be equated with the notion of transitions (Merriam & Clark, 1991). Schulz and Rau suggest that "at the most basic level, the life course can be defined as

the major life events and transitions an individual experiences between birth and death" (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; p. 145).

Critical life events whether crisis oriented or normative often lead to a transitional state characterized by uniform patterns of response. Change (either overt or covert; conscious or unconscious) is often the outcome. Life events may require relatively limited change or may result in a sweeping reorganization of the major networks in one's life and the meaning perspectives we hold that guide our action. These changes can occur both within the individual's life space and assumptive world. Life space can be defined as the socio-cultural environment within which the individual interacts and the individual's assumptive world includes the individual's total set of assumptions, values, attitudes and beliefs (Mezirow, 1978, 1981, 1990; Golan, 1981; Levinson, 1986).

Over the past decade we have seen a growing body of literature emerge that focuses on adult learning activities. Findings from this research often identify life transitions as a major impetus for learning (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Merriam & Clark, 1991). Aslanian & Brickell (1980) found that 83% of the learners in their sample could describe some past, present, or future change in their lives as reasons for learning. "Clearly, the need to make sense out of one's life experiences is often an incentive for engaging in a learning activity in the first place" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 307).

While life events and transitions have been recognized as potential triggers for engaging in learning activities, very little emphasis has been placed on the informal personal learning that can result (Mezirow, 1990, 1991; Merriam & Clark, 1991; Jarvis, 1987). What is actually learned from life events? How does this learning occur and what impact does it have on our lives? Is there a connection between the resulting learning and adult development?

Theorists such as Jarvis (1987), Brookfield (1987) Mezirow (1978, 1981, 1990, 1991), and Merriam and Clark (1991) recognize a crucial link between adult learning, adult development, and a precipitating event. Emerging research in this area suggests that the most significant learning in adulthood results from informal versus formal learning experiences (Brookfield, 1987; Mezirow, 1990, 1991; Merriam & Clark, 1991). "The most important adult learning occurs in connection with life transitions" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 17).

A recent study by Merriam & Clark (1991) into the amount and type of perceived significant learning in adulthood found the following:

> When we examined the learning events themselves, we noticed that the overwhelming majority of them were not experiences of formal education but rather could be categorized as informal or life-experience learning, a finding all the more striking given the high

educational level of our sample (80% had done some graduate work). (p. 178)

Brookfield (1987) acknowledges that both positive and negative life experiences can act as triggers for significant learning.

Significant learning, as defined by Merriam & Clark (1991), includes two components: (1) an experience that personally affects the learner by resulting in expansion of skills and abilities, sense of self, or life perspective, or by precipitating a transformation that involves the whole person; (2) an experience that is subjectively valued by the learner (p. 204). Brookfield (1987) identifies four characteristics of significant learning: (1) it is perceived as profoundly important by the learner; (2) it is frequently triggered by a major life crisis; (3) it entails a redefinition of some aspect of self; and (4) basic assumptions, values, and beliefs are called into question. Although Merriam & Clark (1991) do not explicitly include a "triggering event" in their definition, they do acknowledge an intrinsic connection between life events and learning.

There is no question that we are shaped by our experience; developmental and life-phase theorists all take that as a given. However, "exactly how learning facilitates development is less obvious, in part because the developmental process has not been extensively studied from a learning perspective" (Merriam & Clark, 1991, p. 194).

Gould (1978), Kegan (1982), Daloz (1986) and Mezirow (1990, 1991) suggest that the intrinsic connection between adult learning and development has more to do with the "transformation" of experience than the accumulation of knowledge. Personal meaning systems are constantly restructured as a result of life experiences. Mezirow's (1990, 1991) theory of transformative learning is the most developed theory to date in this area.

Mezirow (1991) suggests that individuals acquire frames of reference (meaning perspectives) through socialization that incorporate our beliefs, values, assumptions and attitudes. All learning and meaning assigned to experience is filtered through our existing meaning perspectives, which guide our actions.

> Meaning perspectives, or generalized sets of habitual expectation, act as perceptual and conceptual codes to form, limit, and distort how we think, believe, and feel and how, what when, why we learn. They have cognitive, affective and conative dimensions. These habits of expectations filter both perceptions and comprehension. (Mezirow, 1991, p.34)

Life events can act as "disorienting dilemmas" which offer opportunities for individuals to critically reflect upon existing beliefs and values. If found to be no longer adequate, meaning perspectives can be

transformed to become more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated (Mezirow, 1991). Any activity that allows adults to develop more inclusive, permeable and integrated meaning perspectives aids in adult development (Mezirow, 1990).

Research into significant personal learning resulting from life experiences is only in an initial stage of development. Very little is known about what type of cognitive and affective learning occurs, whether the process of learning differs, and how this learning impacts adult development.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore significant adult learning experiences associated with a critical life event. The perceived significance of the event, the cognitive and affective learning that occurred and the impact of the learning on the individuals' lives were focused on in this study.

Problem Statement

What significant personal learning results from a critical life event, and what impact does this learning have on the lives of adults?

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. What is the perceived significance of the event, and what type of

meaning do adults attach to this experience?

2. What type of personal learning occurred as a result of the event?

3. What impact did the significant personal learning have on the adult's life?

4. How did significant personal learning influence the adult's attitudes, decisions and behaviour?

Assumptions

The following assumptions are inherent in this study:

1. Participants' significant personal learning can be accurately ascertained through interviews.

2. Participants will be open and honest in their responses to the extent that this is possible for them.

3. Participants will be able to reflect upon and express the type of learning and impact the critical life event has had on their feelings, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to six adults who experienced a critical life event prior to 1991. A minimum of one year must have lapsed since the critical life event to allow for reflection and personal learning to occur. Only those critical life events that occurred in adulthood were considered for this

study.

No attempt was made to compare the intensity or type of critical life events that lead to significant personal learning, to study learning that preceded the critical life event, or to study formal learning that was undertaken as a result of a critical life event.

Limitations

The following limitations have been identified that relate to this study:

Researcher bias

The researcher acknowledges that personal assumptions and biases, as well as personal and professional experiences influenced the research design and conclusions. A journal was maintained by the researcher to record feelings, reactions and personal insights that arose through the research process. The journal acted as a valuable tool for the researcher to become aware of and minimize inherent influences. It also was utilized as a personal learning tool by the researcher.

In addition, at each step of the data collection and analysis process, all information, themes, insights and emerging categories were fed back to the participants for clarification. The researcher engaged in dialogue with each of the participants regularly throughout the research process in order

to minimize inherent biases.

Sensitive nature of the data

The personal and sensitive nature of the data being collected may have influenced and/or limited the participants' willingness to reflect upon, recall and express their feelings, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours surrounding their critical life event.

The potential emotional component of the data collected may also have effected the researcher's ability to clearly understand what was being said. To alleviate this concern the researcher engaged in a process of regularly summarizing what was being shared and feeding this back to the participant (both verbally and in writing) for verification. Every effort was made to establish an environment of support and empathy that was conducive to sharing. The researcher also maintained journal notes after each interview to record feeling and impressions that may have influenced data collection.

The researcher recognizes that it is not possible to tap all relevant factors affecting experience; thus, other significant influences and factors which remain private and unshared are inevitably present.

Interviewing Skills

The researcher acknowledges the potential to have influenced the

direction of the interviews. Emphasis was placed on "staying with" the participants in order to clearly understand the experiences they were portraying. The researcher's past training and experience as a mental health counsellor was considered valuable for this purpose.

This study was also limited by the researcher's own interviewing skills.

Gender disclosure differences

The researcher acknowledges the possible gender disclosure differences in collecting data. Special attention was paid to this issue to enhance the amount and depth of data collected from both males and females.

Relationship with participants

No personal relationship had been established with the participants prior to commencing this study. Recognizing that the established relationship between the researcher and participant governs the amount of data available for interpretation and analysis (Baker, 1986; Merriam & Simpson, 1984; Merriam, 1987; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), great effort was extended to establish an atmosphere conducive to trust and sharing. Each participant had a minimum of three contacts (one face-to-face contact and two by telephone) prior to the first taped interview that assisted in

establishing an initial relationship. During initial contact with the participants, the researcher shared professional and personal interest in the area of study in order to provide a context for the participants. Prior to each interview time was allotted to outline the areas to be addressed in the interview. As well, both the researcher and participant shared their levels of personal comfort at the time of interviewing. Following each interview, time was allocated to debrief and share personal reactions and feelings. All data collected and each step of the analysis process were shared with the participants for clarification and verification. However, irrespective of the above strategies, the ability to establish a relationship with the participants was recognized as a possible limitation of the study.

Limited generalizability

The generalizability of the data to other contexts or to other adults is limited.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will apply:

Significant personal learning - Stephen Brookfield (Boud & Griffin, 1987) outlines four distinguishing characteristics of significant personal learning:

(a) it is self-consciously perceived as significantly important by the

learners themselves;

(b) it is frequently triggered by a major life crisis as the self-reflection and appraisal characteristics of significant learning requires a prompt of considerable potency;

(c) it entails a redefinition of some aspect of self;

(d) basic assumptions, values and beliefs are called into question.

Critical life event is defined as any event, positive or negative, internal or external to the individual that is perceived as "critical" or "significant" in their lives (death, divorce, birth of a child, change of a job, geographical relocation, marriage etc).

Need for the Study

Critical life events can act as triggers for the most significant learning identified by adults. Understanding how to enhance this learning can only occur through an awareness of the elements involved in significant personal learning. Adult educators are in a unique position to assist adult learners in capitalizing on life events. Research shows that adults often return to post-secondary institutions as a result of life events (Aslanian & Brickell, 1981; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). Rather than focusing primarily on the instrumental dimensions of content learning in higher education, adult educators can become attuned to the transformative

potential in formal education experiences and act as facilitators in the developmental process of their students (Merriam & Clark, 1991; Daloz, 1986). Through integrating life experiences into adult education curriculum and encouraging learners to critically reflect on these events, adult educators can have a enormous impact on the type of learning that occurs within educational settings.

Significant personal learning that occurs in adulthood is also strongly linked to adult development. Theories about adult development have only been emerging within the last two decades so are still in the formative stages. An increased understanding of significant adult learning experiences can provide some insights into the connection between learning and development, which in turn leads to more comprehensive and inclusive developmental theories.

Theories on significant personal learning &/or transformative learning are also in their formative stages (Boud & Griffin, 1987; Mezirow, 1991). Any research that expands these theoretical foundations or present understanding of adult learning is not only beneficial but required.

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study was to explore the participants' significant personal learning experiences resulting from a critical life event. By reflecting on the event and the learning resulting from it, participants were asked to attach meaning to their experiences. The emphasis was on learning as it exists through experience and this requires a phenomenologically based research approach (Berritt, Beekman, Bleeker & Mulderij, 1983). Qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding phenomena or experience from the participants' perspective (Firestone, 1987; Berritt et al, 1983; Merriam & Simpson, 1984; Merriam, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, 1990). The type of knowledge accessed within qualitative research studies is intuitive knowledge resulting from the use of feelings (Merriam & Simpson, 1984). As Spiegelberg (1965) suggests, "the basic method of research is "seeing" or "intuiting" or "reflecting" upon one's experiences" (p. 669).

Qualitative researchers are interested in showing how meaning arises from experience. As Merriam and Simpson (1984) state, "This form of inquiry is an attempt to deal with inner experiences unprobed in everyday life" (p.84) and often involves descriptive studies focusing on perceptions, intentions and the origin and relationship between experiences. "The

ultimate goal of this kind of inquiry is to portray the complex pattern of what is being studied in sufficient depth and detail so that one who has not experienced it can understand it" (Ary et al., 1990, p. 445).

Phenomena, or more precisely, the participants' interpretation of their experiences, is a primary source of data in qualitative research (Taylor, 1970; Merriam & Simpson, 1984). "Phenomena" include thinking, believing, perceiving, feeling and acting within a social context. In order to understand experience it must be studied in its "totality", taking into account all influences and variables. As human experiences occur within social contexts they are necessarily context-bound. As Ary et al. (1990) state, "...human experience takes its meaning from and therefore is inseparable from, social, historical, political, and cultural influences" (p. 447). With this in mind, participants must be studied within the natural setting of every day life.

In qualitative research the researcher is the primary data gathering instrument (Ary et al., 1990; Merriam, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Simpson, 1984). Both interviews and a critical incident form were utilized for data collection within this study. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, designed to elicit insight and reflection upon an identified critical life event.

A critical incident form was completed by participants and used both as a data collection technique and as a method of selecting the sample for

this study (see Appendix A). Critical incident techniques have been utilized in the social science research for the past thirty years (Brookfield, 1987).

> Briefly stated, the critical incident technique prompts respondents to identify an incident that for some reason was of particular significance to them. The researcher provides a set of instructions on what kind of incident is to be identified, and the respondents are then asked to write a one-, or at most two- paragraph statement describing the incident. These statements are to be written as specifically as possible, with particular details provided as requested. (Brookfield, 1987, p. 97)

Critical incident exercises provide the researcher with "hunches" regarding the significance and assumptions of the participants. By incorporating a different medium such as writing, participants are encouraged to approach the incident from a different perspective. Critical incident techniques are also used as a form of validity check, comparing written descriptions of an event to general feelings and opinions shared in an interview (Brookfield, 1987).

Data collected through the use of the critical incident form were used to refine and focus the questions used within the interviews. As with other qualitative research studies, the design incorporated inductive reasoning

(Ary et al., 1990; Merriam, 1988; Merriam & Simpson, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam and Simpson (1984) define inductive reasoning as "observing individual cases in moving to generalizations" (p. 3). Lincoln & Guba (1985) refer to it as "probable inference" (p. 114). The data collected through the critical incident form and interviews were utilized to identify themes, and commonalities which provided the foundation for "inference drawing" by the researcher.

Recruitment of Sample

The sample for this study was recruited from two post-secondary educational institutions within Edmonton. Recruiting was directed towards adult students (over the age of 25 years) through approaching the Mature Undergraduate and Graduate Students Association (MUGS) and graduate programs within the university. Various human services programs within the Millwoods campus of Grant MacEwan Community College were also approached. The process undertaken for recruitment is outlined below:

1. The president of MUGS was contacted and provided a synopsis of the proposed study outlining purpose, focus, process, sample, expectations, and ethical considerations. He agreed to insert 120 flyers (see Appendix A) into quarterly newsletter to be distributed to current MUGS members.

2. Acting under the assumption that adult students are often

prompted to return to school following a life event, and helping professions seem to attract students who have experienced their own personal life experiences, certain diploma programs within Grant MacEwan College were approached and permission was sought to have flyers distributed to both first and second year students in the classroom. Approximately 130 flyers were distributed.

3. Each department within the Faculty of Education was contacted and permission was sought to distribute flyers to all graduate students (Masters and Doctoral) through student mailboxes. With the exception of the Adult, Career and Technology Department, approximately 250 flyers were distributed within each department.

4. Acting under the assumption that the Education departments consist of a larger majority of females, Civil Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Rural Economy and Animal Science Departments were approached in the hopes of recruiting male graduate students. A total of 250 flyers were distributed to graduate students within these departments.

5. In total, 750 flyers were distributed within Grant MacEwan College and the University of Alberta.

6. Fifteen individuals volunteered to participate in the study after having telephone contact with the researcher.

7. The researcher met with each individual personally for approximately 45 minutes to further discuss the parameters of the study; to

have the participants complete a Participant Consent Form; and to distributed a Critical Incident form. Depending on the comfort level of the participant, the critical incident form was either left with the individual to be completed in private or was completed during the initial meeting with the researcher.

Selection of the Data Sample

Fifteen adults (six males and nine females) completed the Critical Incident Form that was used as a data tool and screening device for this study. The researcher's desire to minimize the parameters placed on the event and demographic variables of the participants, resulted in the following factors being considered in the selection of a sample of six adults (two males and four females):

(a) the timing of the event (events that occurred prior to adulthood and those that occurred after 1991 were discounted);

(b) the individual's ability and willingness to openly discuss the event with the researcher and write about the learning that resulted;

(c) the degree to which the individual had reflected on the event (this was ascertained by his/her discussion of the insights gained and the personal impact of the event);

(d) whether the event required a major reorganization of the individual's life space or was only minimally disruptive;

(e) the degree to which significant personal learning occurred, based

on the definition outlined in Chapter I;

(f) the individual's stated motivation for engaging in the study (individuals desiring a therapeutic intervention were not included);

(g) the researcher's desire to have both males and females represented in the study;

(h) the researcher's desire to have a variety of different life events represented;

(i) the desire of the individuals to commit the time required to participate in the study.

Description of the Participants

Four females and two males were selected to participate in this study. A brief description of each participant is outlined below to provide a context from which the data for this study was collected. Pseudonyms replace their real names for purposes of maintaining confidentiality. Sandy, Darlene, Maureen, Brenda, Paul and Tim will be highlighted.

Sandy is a 29 year old university student in her third year of her science program. Her critical life event occurred in 1990, when after four years of estrangement, she separated from her husband of nine years. Sandy was enrolled in her second year of university when she chose to leave the small community she was living in and move to Edmonton. A custody dispute over her young child resulted in her son remaining with her

husband to continue attending school. Sandy has joint custody of her son and sees him on designated weekends and holidays. Choosing to leave her husband sparked a traumatic and emotional process of self exploration and learning for Sandy. Professional counselling assisted Sandy in dealing with the emotional impact of the separation and in exploring personal behaviour patterns and beliefs.

Darlene is a 47 year old women, married with four grown children. In 1988, while teaching at a post-secondary institution in Edmonton and pursuing a part-time PhD program, three members of Darlene's family died in unrelated events. In July, her brother died suddenly of a brain aneurysm. Immediately upon returning from her brother's funeral, Darlene received word that her father had passed away after having been in a stroke induced coma since the spring. In December of the same year, her mother passed away from a stroke. Within six months Darlene's family had been reduced from five members to two remaining siblings.

Deciding to pursue fulltime PhD studies in January, Darlene began suffering from migraine headaches. A search for a medical basis for these headaches resulted in her receiving medication and counselling from a psychiatrist. It was this relationship that assisted her in processing the deaths and prompted a personal awareness journey.

In 1989, Maureen lived in a small community outside of Edmonton with her husband and two sons, and was pregnant with her third child.

Complications in her pregnancy resulted in the premature birth of their daughter. She was born 10 weeks premature and suffered from lung, heart and liver complications. Her daughter spent the first few weeks of life on a respirator, underwent heart surgery, and at the age of six months, died during a liver transplant operation. The death prompted a serious depression and withdrawal, which led to a struggle to start again. The community where Maureen lived had few professional support services. In her search for support and guidance, she connected with another bereaved woman who was able to provide her with assistance through the initial stages of grief. With her family, Maureen moved into Edmonton, registered in a diploma program through Grant MacEwan College, and became actively involved in a bereavement support group. Maureen is 31 years old and is considering pursuing a degree after the completion of her diploma this year.

In 1978, Brenda lived on an acreage with her husband and two children. By outside appearances all was well, however Brenda was very lonely and depressed. She isolated herself from the world, consuming her days with house cleaning and raising children. She had no close friends and her husband was often out of town on work. Brenda had very low self esteem and perceived the outside world as foreign and scary. She felt that she was less than others and that she had nothing to contribute and no reason to live. She often thought of suicide, feeling that everyone would be

better off without her.

A surprising turn around in her life occurred as a result of her critical life event, what she calls a "salvation experience" in 1978. Through becoming involved with various religious organizations, Brenda began the long journey of rebuilding her sense of self. Her learning process involved seeking professional counselling, becoming connected with community and family, and taking charge of the direction of her life. As part of this process, Brenda discovered a history of sexual and physical abuse that she had endured as a small child. Fourteen years later Brenda still lives on the same acreage however she has learned to love herself and redirect her energies and priorities. She is 45 years old, is presently enrolled in a diploma program at Grant MacEwan College, and is still active in her church organization.

In 1982, at the age of 18 years old, Paul immigrated with his family from India. His family had been sponsored by his older brother who was a resident of Canada. The stress of adapting to a new culture was accentuated by difficulties within the family, resulting in Paul's father returning to India and Paul moving with his mother and two sisters to another home. Two years later, at the age of 20, Paul was registered in a grade eleven program in a local school in Edmonton. Up until now, all of Paul's energies were directed into maintaining top academic grades with little attention paid to other areas of life. While attempting to lessen his

focus on studies and to begin dating, Paul's critical life event was the personal rejection by a female peer in 1984. This event sent Paul into a spiralling depression downwards leading to suicidal tendencies, hospitalization, medication and numerous visits to psychiatrists and counsellors. Paul still struggles with depressive bouts today, however, he has embarked on a lengthy process of self exploration and healing that has lasted for 8 years. Paul was enrolled in a first year science program when he volunteered for this study, however, chose to withdraw in the second semester.

In 1984, Tim was making good money as a mechanic, was married and had two daughters. He was a hard worker, often working two jobs at one time; driven by his pursuit of money and material possessions. Although a good provider, Tim did not share his personal feelings or opinions, allowing others to make decisions for him. He had a low sense of self, stating he was non-assertive and afraid of failure.

After the birth of his second daughter, Tim's marriage of 5 years began to deteriorate along with their financial standing. For three and a half years the stress and difficulties in the marriage increased, to the point of Tim feeling helpless, hopeless and a loss of control. At the same time, he was told by his boss that the shop would be closing and he had five months to find work. Tim's critical life event was his separation and subsequent divorce from his wife in 1988, when their youngest daughter was four years

old.

Four years later, Tim is 35 years old, divorced, and is enrolled as a diploma student in Grant MacEwan College pursuing a career change. He works part-time in the human services field and enjoys designated weekend visits with his daughters.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative research designs are necessarily emergent, allowing for the collection and analysis of data to occur recurrently and simultaneously. "Hunches, working hypotheses, and educated guesses direct the investigator's attention to certain data and then to refining and/or verifying one's hunches. The process of data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic" (Merriam, 1988, p. 123). Data collected from the critical incident forms were analyzed and used to focus the interview process. Data collected from each interview subsequently influenced the focus of interviews to follow. Data analysis occurred at each stage of the research process, becoming more intensive once all the data had been collected.

Merriam (1988) suggests that there are three levels of analysis in qualitative research studies: (1) descriptive; (2) interpretative; and (3) making inferences and theory building. All three levels of analysis were incorporated into this study. A description of the collection and analysis process undertaken in this study is outlined.

Preliminary Steps to Data Collection

A critical incident form was developed for use in sample selection and data collection (see Appendix B). Two of the initial fifteen individuals (one male and one female) who volunteered for this study were used to pilot the form. The form was piloted for clarity, format and content.

A list of semi-structured open ended questions was developed that acted as a guide during the interview process (see Appendix C). Two participants (one male and one female) who had been selected to participate in the study engaged in pilot interviews with the researcher in order to test the relevancy of the interview guide, and to pilot interviewing approaches. The two participants who piloted the critical incident form and the two chosen to pilot the interview guide were not the same individuals.

Prior to data collection, "Participant Consent Forms" were completed by the fifteen individuals who volunteered to participate in this study. The purpose of the study, confidentiality issues and their rights as participants were outlined in the consent form (Appendix D).

Completion of Critical Incident Form

Fifteen individuals completed the critical incident form which was used as a mechanism for selecting the sample population as well as a method of collecting data for the purposes of this study. All completed

critical incident forms were compiled and funnelled through the criteria outlined above under the Selection of Data Sample section. For each relevant factor, the data were assigned a 1-3 numerical value in order to establish variance. Factors such as ability to disclose, motivation for involvement, and gender were given slightly more weight than others. Although factors had been established prior to analysis, the researcher acknowledges that the selection was subjectively influenced by personal beliefs about the suitability of each participant.

The data collected through the critical incident forms began to reveal emerging themes and commonalities which were explored further in the first interviews. The interview guide was adjusted to accommodate these emerging insights.

Nine of the initial fifteen volunteers who were not selected for the sample were sent a letter thanking them for their participation. Critical incident forms completed by these volunteers were destroyed as they were no longer required for the study.

Personal Interviews

Three personal interviews were held with each of the six participants in the study. The initial interviews, which were approximately 1.0 hour in length, were used to discuss the written critical incident; to gather background information not included in the critical incident form; to further

discuss what life was like for the participants at the time of the event; the perceived significant learning resulting from the event; and any lasting impact the event has had on the lives of the participants. Each initial interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim with insights, questions, and themes recorded in the researcher's journal. A copy of the transcript was mailed to the participants as a validity check prior to second interview to allow time for perusal. The sharing of transcripts after each interview became a insightful strategy for promoting participant self reflection.

Following initial interviews with each participant, the researcher reflected on the session and recorded insights, perceptions and feelings in the research journal. Inconsistencies and/or missing information was recorded to enable these to be readdressed in the next interview.

The second interview began by reflecting on the transcript and any insights that had emerged for the participants. Learning resulting from their event was further explored with emphasis placed on the impact this had on the participants' lives. Through dialogue with the researcher, participants identified a cluster of life spheres that had been impacted by their event. The learnings and changes that occurred in each life sphere were shared by the participants.

The second interviews had been audiotaped and were replayed several times to allow for the researcher to summarize and identify themes for each participant. The emerging cluster of life spheres that had been

impacted by the critical life event was further analyzed by the researcher. The data collected from the first and second interviews were reviewed, with separate categories created to filter the data through. Using these categories, a before and after snapshot for each participant was developed and shared.

In reviewing the emerging themes, a process of learning began to emerge for each participant. While developing individual learning processes for each participant, amazing similarities within the sample began to surface. In addition, particular types of personal learning were identified and recorded. A copy of the summarized transcript; the emerging themes; the types of personal learning identified; and the emerging learning process was sent out to each participant for verification in an attempt to reduce researcher bias. Any discrepancies were identified and corrected.

The third interview began by reviewing the participants summaries, discussing the themes and commonalities, and the emerging learning process. Areas that required further clarification were revisited. Through a process of dialogue, themes were refined, categories condensed and the group learning process consolidated. Participants further reflected upon their learning and shared their feelings and experiences of having participated in this study. Each had been surprised by the commonalities that emerged between his/her experiences and those of the other participants.

The third interviews were again audiotaped, reviewed and summarized in writing. Insights and perceptions were recorded in the researcher's journal. Prior analysis was set aside and the data from all three interviews and the critical incident form were brought together, reviewed and coded using a computerized coding program. Incongruencies between the two approaches of data analysis were minimal. Categories were further refined or expanded when required. Inconsistencies that arose that were unable to be resolved by the researcher were taken back to selected participants for discussion. In addition, an uninvolved peer was recruited to review selected transcripts, focusing on emerging categories, themes, and coding approaches. The process of data analysis, the justification of category development, and the creation of the learning process were re-examined and explored from the perspective of the uninvolved peer. Discrepancies between the peer's analysis and that of the researcher's were minimal and not seen to influence the analysis of the data.

A draft of the data analysis process and results was developed and sent out to each participant in the study for review and discussion. Appropriate changes were than made to the final draft.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Dealing with validity and reliability issues pose unique concerns for

qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1987). Four approaches were incorporated into this study to address validity and reliability issues: triangulation; member check; peer consultation; and an audit trail.

Triangulation

Triangulation, either through the use of multiple research strategies or multiple methods of data collection and analysis strengthens internal validity and reliability (Merriam, 1987; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Husband & Foster, 1987). For the purposes of this study, data were collected through both a written critical incident form and personal interviews to allow for cross-referencing and comparison of data.

Member Check

Member checks were utilized extensively throughout the data collection and analysis processes. A copy of each interview transcript was provided to the participants after each interview. Dialogue with each participant occurred around all steps of the analysis process. All participants assisted in the formulation of categories, themes, and the group learning process. Discrepancies and inconsistencies were taken back to the participants for discussion. A draft of the data analysis chapters (chapter three and four) was mailed to the participants for review and

necessary changes were incorporated in the final draft. Continuous member checks were utilized throughout the research process in order to increase the validity of data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1987; Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 1990).

Peer consultation

Peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or peer examination (Merriam, 1987) refers to consulting with "disinterested" peers (peers not involved in the research project) regarding the validity of findings and/or the inquiry process itself. Fellow graduate students and well as faculty at the University of Alberta were consulted at different steps of the process. A copy of two interviews that had been transcribed verbatim, and the coding that had been assigned to these transcripts was reviewed by a fellow graduate student to allow for cross referencing and to act as a validity check. Likewise, as themes and commonalities began to emerge these were shown to faculty members and graduate students for discussion. No information was shared that may have led to identification of the participants involved.

Audit Trail

An audit trail, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), was maintained throughout the research process. This included notes taken

after interviews, correspondence with participants, transcripts of interviews, and notes regarding process and analysis. Every step involved in structuring and organizing the research project, collection of data and the analysis process was documented and maintained.

In addition, the researcher maintained a journal which incorporated personal insights, feelings and perceptions. This journal was useful in capturing the data collection process, and identifying personal biases and assumptions as the research proceeded. Reflection and insights recorded throughout the data collection process assisted in the analysis of data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues must be considered during the collection and analysis of data, as well as the dissemination of findings (Merriam, 1987). All research undertaken within the Department of Adult, Career and Technology Education must first be reviewed and found acceptable by a department ethics review committee. A proposal of this study was submitted and approved. All committee recommendations were incorporated into the study. Additional ethical consideration and strategies are listed below.

Informed consent

All participants engaged in any phase of the study were asked to

sign a "Participant Consent Form" that outlined the purpose of the study; what was expected of the participants; the areas the study addressed; and the use of the data collected (Appendix D). Within this study, participants were asked to reflect upon a critical life event. Due to the emotional component of this personal exploration, the consent form acknowledged the potential effects the interviewing process may have on the participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity

A written guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity was provided to all participants. All data collected through interviews and critical incident forms were assigned a numerical code to protect anonymity of the participants. The participant consent forms, which contained both the participant's name and his/her assigned numerical code, was kept in a locked place separate from any data that were collected to reduce the chances of identification. Upon completion of the analysis process, each numerical code was transferred over to a pseudo name that was used to refer to the participants in the written thesis document. No documentation exists that would connect the assigned pseudo name with any of the participants involved. Likewise, no information about the participants or their contexts was disclosed that may have led to identification by others.

During the process of transcribing recorded interviews, any references made to names or place of employment were deleted in the

transcript. Upon completion of data analysis all tapes containing recorded interviews were erased.

Respect

All participants and their privacy were treated with the utmost respect by the researcher. Only those areas that were directly related to the present study were explored.

Sharing of the process

During the initial stages of data collection, the researcher ensured that all participants understood the structure and focus of each interview. The types of questions that were to be asked, and the direction the data collection was to proceed, were shared with the participants. As the process of data collection and analysis proceeded, the participants began taking an active role in guiding and directing the process. Input from participants was received regarding the areas of importance for data collection, and the emerging categories, themes and learning process. Each step of the analysis phase was taken back to the participants for verification and consideration.

Option to withdraw

Upon commencing the study, participants clearly understood their

rights, which were listed in the "Participant Consent Form". The option to withdraw from the study, to answer only those questions they felt comfortable addressing, and to stop an interview at any time were outlined to all participants.

CHAPTER THREE

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

A wealth of data on the personal learning that evolved from the participants' critical life events was collected throughout the research process. The findings for this study were divided into two separate chapters. The significance attached to the critical life event; the six phase learning process; and the five major significant personal learnings that occurred are outlined in chapter three. The impact the event and subsequent learning had on six areas of the participants' lives is explored in chapter four. Pseudo names have been assigned to the quotes incorporated to allow for a sense of continuity of the participants' thoughts and experiences.

Significance of critical life events

Critical life events are uniquely personal, representing a variety of experiences and meanings. In an attempt to understand significance, participants were asked to share their perceptions of why the events were seen as "critical" in their lives.

For the participants in this study, it was not the type, rather the intensity of the events and their ability to disrupt old patterns that were seen

as significant. Five aspects were attributed to the significance of the events.

1. For all participants, old patterns of coping were found to no longer be effective.

> It is one of the few times I've been totally overwhelmed....everything I did before didn't work. I felt like I was trying to put three glasses of water into one...it didn't fit and it didn't matter how many 'to do' lists I made or how I put everything together...nothing worked. (Darlene)

2. The event was seen as "derailing" in the sense that day to day routines were effected.

> It took so much out of me because of its effect on everybody and me...it was a small minute thing in this world but the impact was incredible. I can see the ripples everywhere. At the time for me it was either sink or swim and I had to make a choice....It did not allow to continue in the same way. (Maureen)

3. Following their critical life events, participants stated that they did not resume life as before. The event had been powerful enough to change

the direction and focus in their lives.

> I didn't go back to the way things were before...I didn't pick up the pieces and continue. I think I shooed them out of the way and made a new puzzle. (Darlene)

4. Particularly for Tim and Sandy who experienced marital separation/divorce, the event forced them into a situation where they had to rely on themselves.

> It was the biggest personal step I ever took into self reliance rather than relying on a fall back. The significance was the sudden self reliance...it is all up to me and I can choose what I want to do.... (Sandy)

5. For each participant, the most pivotal aspect of their critical life event was how each participant was thrust into a process of self evaluation and reflection.

> When I left it was the first move to looking at myself. (Sandy)

> It destroyed a whole bunch of beliefs I had about myself. (Tim)

Learning Process

A six phase process emerged that describes the learning each participant went through as a result of his/her event. A few minor exceptions to this process exists, which will be identified in the appropriate sections. Though unique in its structure, the phases outlined in this learning process are not new to the field of psychology or other social science disciplines. Their similarities and differences will be addressed in Chapter V.

The following phases were identified as part of the learning process experienced by the participants: (a) Disorientation; (b) Emotional Impact; (c) Building Connections; (d) Journey into Self; (e) Reaffirmation of Self; and (f) Contextual Awareness. Though general agreement existed amongst the participants, one individual experienced "contextual awareness" before "reaffirmation of self". It must be emphasized that this process is not a step by step process whereby an individual masters one step and moves on the next. Although the phases appear to occur in order, the process is not necessarily linear in its progression, as an individual moves back and forth continually revisiting phases.

A continuum model has been adopted for this study as it appears to best describe the experiences of the participants (see Figure 1). At any stage of the process an individual may be located on each of the six continuums. As the process progresses, the individual's position on each

continuum, as numerically represented, changes. Initially, the numerical values for the first phases are high, with the latter phases having lower numerical values. As the learning process continues, a shift occurs where the earlier phases decrease in numerical value and the latter stages increase in value. A linear progression through these phases would look something like the following. As disorientation begins to dissipate, the emotional reaction is high; as a result of high emotions the individual begins reaching out to others; as part of the process of reaching out the individual begins to look within; looking within leads to an exploration and resulting affirmation of self; with a strong sense of self the individual becomes more aware of contextual issues. Although the participants felt that this would be the ideal way of progressing through a learning process resulting from a critical life event, not one of them experienced the learning process linearly. Earlier phases were continually revisited as the process continued. As Tim states:

> A person can be in each stage. [Four years later] I think I'm still in the second phase dealing with depression at times but I'm also working on the fifth phase, developing a sense of self....(Tim)

Figure 1

Learning Phases

1. Disorientation

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. Emotional Impact

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. Building Connections

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. Journey into Self

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. Reaffirmation of Self

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. Contextual Awareness

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Phase One: Disorientation

The initial phase of the process was dominated by the overwhelming sense of shock, denial and/or disbelief by the participants. All of the participants who experienced unexpected and externally initiated critical life

events (death, divorce and rejection) experienced this phase.

> I thought I had lost it then...are you really here and is this really happening.... I remember the shock, I just couldn't believe it. (Maureen)

Sandy and Brenda's critical life events were self-initiated, and as a result felt their process began at phase two.

> Disorientation doesn't seem to fit since I choose to leave....it started with the next stage.... (Sandy)

This phase was generally short lived and allowed the participants to take care of the daily requirements and arrangements necessary as a result of the event (funeral arrangements, notification of family, relocation).

Phase Two: Emotional/Physical Impact

As the reality of the event began to emerge, the participants stated the next phase was either an intense emotional reaction &/or physical deterioration. Commonly participants were hit with a bombardment of emotional feelings and expressions. Depending on whether the event was perceived as positive or negative, a combination of the following reactions

were experienced: depression, sadness, anger, hurt, uncertainty, anxiety, euphoria, hope, happiness. For five of the participants in the study, the emotions experienced during this phase would be considered negative.

> You finally come out of denial and shock and the pain really hits.....I did want to die. That's all I wanted for a long time was let me curl up and run away. (Maureen)

> I was feeling quite anxious. I remember having a few, what I now recognize as panic attacks...At home it would manifest itself in racing thoughts, feeling of having to do something but not knowing what. (Tim)

However, for Brenda, the emotional feelings that she experienced were intensely positive. She experienced the following:

> I didn't feel the same anymore...the first thing I noticed was that I didn't have those same ....suicidal thoughts... I didn't have those feelings that everybody would be better off it I wasn't here...[I felt] freedom, lightness.... (Brenda)

It should be noted that Brenda's was the only critical life event (her

spiritual salvation experience) that was initially viewed as a positive event. Although today each participant views the outcomes of their critical life events as positive, five of the participants initial perceptions of the event were very negative and disruptive, hence their initial emotions were also negative.

Processing the emotional impact of the event was seen as imperative in order to proceed. For two participants who initially denied or ignored their emotions, they experienced physical reactions such as migraine headaches and physical deterioration.

> I thought I probably had a brain tumour and was going crazy. Like I seriously thought that I must have some medical problem because I was getting violent headaches. (Darlene)

In all cases of physical deterioration strong emotions surfaced through reflection. It was by recognizing the bodies physical reaction to stress that Sandy and Brenda were able to identify the emotions and feelings that had been repressed.

Phase Three: Building Connections

In an attempt to deal with their emotional reactions, participants began reaching out to others. A search for answers began: Why am I

feeling this way? Why did this happen to me? What can I do to get back on my feet again? All participants agreed that at this phase they were operating under the assumption that the answers existed out there somewhere, with professionals, family or friends.

> In one of the sessions with the psychiatrist I even took a tape recorder so I could listen...their words sounded like wisdom.... they had insight into me that I didn't. (Paul)

Making connections with others was strongly motivated by the need to find answers.

> I was running from doctor to doctor and counsellor to counsellor trying to find out what was wrong...I was looking for some answers...somebody else knows, I don't know....(Tim)

> I remember the search for why...reading and everything to find out why....(Maureen)

In an attempt to receive empathy and understanding, participants connected with family & friends, community support groups, religious organizations and professional counselling services.

> I felt so bad in my own eyes and felt so guilty...that I think I went about talking to brothers and sisters and my parents for support...for understanding...for wanting someone to understand me....(Tim)

> I was looking for support for myself. I needed to talk...it occurred to me that I would have to go outside to get some of the support that I needed in that stage that I was at...outside the home. (Maureen)

With the exception of one participant, all sought out and engaged in professional counselling at this phase of the process. The one exception sought out counselling services, however they were not available in the small community in which she resided. Instead she connected with another bereaved parent and a bereavement support group to gain the support and assistance she required. For the majority of the participants in the study, professional counselling was seen as a vital step, which was initiated and stopped through various phases in the process.

> I think going to counselling is an important step...because until you are ready to say I need help you are not ready to face what is going on. (Sandy)

> Counselling was a big part of learning about self and making life manageable, questioning why I do things that way I do. (Darlene)

Although a professional counselling relationship enhanced participants processing of the event, responsibility for personal learning remained with the participants themselves. Numerous sources of knowledge were sought out by each participant: peers, books, self awareness workshops, television, schools, community organizations. Paul's search for answers found him reading literature on philosophy, psychology, science, and western and eastern religions.

> I took a lot of responsibility for understanding what was going on. Because I wasn't being helped kept me going looking for it. (Paul)

> As such, I became my own analyst, or therapist...trying to direct and find out what was wrong with me. (Tim)

Participants described this phase as a reaching outside their personal comfort zones and an exploring of different coping mechanisms. By reaching out to others, participants identified the personal risk involved in changing different patterns of behaving and coping. All participants described themselves as being somewhat isolated from others with their

worlds revolving around a small nucleus of friends and family prior to their event.

> ...a reaching out to other people began...that was probably the chief thing...prior to that there was a lot of isolation.... (Brenda)

Though participants experienced personal risk by reaching out to others, the intensity of their emotional reaction to their life event forced them to move outside of previous comfort zones in order to cope. For most, the result was a renewed sense of hope to discover that they were not alone in their process of healing.

> Discovering other people....learning all those same kinds of things from other people, that hey, I'm not alone here...that was a really liberating thing, really liberating to find out other people felt the same way. (Brenda)

Phase Four: Journey Into Self

With the assistance of others, the participants began exploring the roots of their emotional reactions and initiated a self exploration journey. During this phase, energy was channelled into addressing the "Who am I?" question.

I can't believe it took 30 years... and that amazes me....I think I just existed. I rolled along with whatever was given to me... and you know it took a crisis to make me aware of myself....I knew I was a mother to my children, a wife to my husband but I didn't know what I was to myself...I had no idea. (Maureen)

I was not a person who was at all sure of anything about myself. I doubted all my feelings, whether that any of it was valid, that I was worthwhile...I didn't have any sense of who I was as a person, any sense of ability, having anything to contribute, of being able to relate to people with me being my own person.... (Brenda)

Participants began critically reflecting upon their roles, their assumptions & beliefs, their life choices, their capabilities, environmental influences, and their values and priorities. This was a phase of tremendous personal learning, insights, discoveries and, once again, emotional upheaval. The roots of emotional feelings and reactions began to become clear; the messages, roles and beliefs carried out of their family of origin began to surface; personal beliefs and assumptions that directed their behaviours and interactions with others were identified.

In the workshop I took we did a clay thing, and it was supposed to be how we felt now, inside. And what I built was this pyramid, which

was a very strong structure, it doesn't fall over, doesn't do all this stuff, but on the inside of the pyramid it was totally hollow. And the sides were so thin it was barely standing up. It represented exactly how I felt. On the outside you couldn't move me if you had a shovel, and on the inside everything was just ready to collapse. So I found out that about myself. And I actually believed for a long time that I was this strong person who could do everybody's thing, and still do my own thing. But I learned that first of all I don't have to, and I learned that I don't want to do everbody's thing. (Sandy)

A major component of the reflection process during this phase was going back to explore basic assumptions, beliefs and roles which were generated within their family of origin. Each participant shared insights into the power his/her upbringing had on day to day interactions with others.

[God] has taken me back and shown why I am who I am. Back to a bunch of childhood junk and that took a lot of time and a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to come to an understanding about what actually...went on back there, what that would up doing to me as a person.... (Brenda)

In my family there were....a lot of arguments, lots of fights. What happened was I became the mediator between my mother and

> father. Somehow or another I got all wrapped up in being responsible for everybody and I carried this into life as well. If you are responsible for everybody than you don't really have to be responsible for yourself. (Sandy)

Five of the six participants readily acknowledged the professional counselling they received in having initiated this exploration. Although Maureen did not engage in professional counselling, she states she participated in several self awareness workshops. For all participants in the study this phase of the process is forever ongoing, and each continue to struggle with this today.

Phase Five: Reaffirmation of Self

With increased awareness participants moved towards reaffirming and enhancing their sense of self. "Self" is seen as analogous with the answer to the "Who am I?" question. A shift in emphasis occurs at this phase. The search for answers leads the participants to direct their energies inwards. Answers are now perceived to lie within the individual and not with outsiders.

> [I was] in search of answers out there and forgetting what is the goal, what is the purpose, and maybe I already have the answers....

(Paul)

Connections that were developed in phase three are often redefined. Significant others are acknowledged as support as opposed to guidance. A development of a renewed sense of personal identity emerges and an acknowledgment of personal power and rights.

> I realise that I've got rights in every situation...personal rights to rights to state how I feel.... (Tim)

> ...you can't live with other's identity...somehow you have to put your foot down and define yourself, who you are and what you stand for and separate yourself from others.... (Paul)

Six categories of personal learning emerged as being pivotal in the process of reaffirming self. These categories have been placed on a continuum to denote their inherent process. Although generic in nature, as a cluster they represent a process of significant growth, learning and development on the part of the participants. The ordering of these categories does not suggest their importance, rather all of the identified categories are seen as being interconnected, wielding influence on each other.

Other directed..... (from)	Self Directed (towards)
Self Alienation..... (from)	Self Awareness (towards)
Emotionally Disintegrated..... (from)	Emotionally Integrated (towards)
Low self esteem..... (from)	Valuing Self (towards)
Detachment..... (from)	Connection (towards)
Materialistic..... (from)	Nonmaterialistic (towards)

Other directedness towards self directedness

All the participants in this study stated that prior to their critical life event that they looked to others to validate their feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Participants felt their lives were externally directed rather than internally directed.

> I was always basing what I should and shouldn't do on other people. I always turned to other people to decide what kind of person I should be. (Maureen)

The women in the study each felt their focus in their lives prior to the event was on meeting the needs and expectation of others (family, friends) --

emphasizing the caregiving role -- however, somewhere in the process neglecting their own needs.

> I was in charge of everybody else's life and now I want to be in charge of my own. (Sandy)

> And again that caused me to sort of think ... why do I have this role that I've assumed or had dumped upon me.... And I can't believe that I've gone through all these years just assuming this particular role without ever even questioning it. (Darlene)

The two men in the sample felt that their prior focus had been on achievement either in school or in work. They were driven by the desire to achieve the accepted image of success in our society: material possessions, a good job, a family -- however, in the process also losing touch with their real selves.

> I was going to show to world that I was something, that I could do something.... materialistic things seemed to make me feel better about myself. (Tim)

Participants stated that they generally adopted the roles and expectation that were thrust upon them from their environment without reflection.

Through a process of reflecting on prior roles and assumptions, participants began redefining and redirecting their lives. Roles that were no longer seen as valid or required were dropped. Personal beliefs about roles in relationships were examined and modified. Short and long term personal goals were rewritten, and for the majority of the participants, established for the first time in their lives. Participants began developing a sense of personal power over the direction and purpose of their lives.

> I have the potential to grow up now, before I didn't. I was stuck...I was going through the motions. Now I have a chance to direct where I want to go. (Paul)

Self Alienation towards self awareness

Each of the participants suggested that he or she had little sense of self prior to the event. Words like "numbness", "nonperson", "zombie", "just existed" were used to describe how participants felt about themselves. Energy was focused on understanding others as opposed to understanding self. Participants felt they existed only in relation to another, not as individuals who could be defined as separate and distinct. Self awareness is a fundamental component of phase five. In order to reaffirm oneself, an indepth understanding of self is required. Questions such as "Who am I?", "What do I believe in?", "What is important in my life?", "Where do I want to go with my life?", "What do I enjoy doing?" etc. were examined, often for

the first time. For each participant in the study, self awareness has become an important priority in his/her life today.

> So partly it was a struggle to understand myself....partly it is exciting because everyday I learn something...everyday I become more in touch with myself, how I am feeling, why I am feeling...my own subconscious is opening up to me... I was numb before. (Paul)

> I'm more in touch with how things are going for me, and what I'm comfortable with. (Maureen)

> I'm really on this personal development kick. Learn as much about myself that I can and be aware of what I'm dealing with in different situations.... (Tim)

Emotionally disintegrated towards emotionally integrated

Part of self alienation is being unconnected with one's feelings and emotions. This is addressed separately because of the reoccurring importance the participants attached to the process of becoming "in touch" with their affective side. While a concern for each participant, different aspects of affect were emphasized for each. Sandy and Paul suggested that they were completely unconnected to their emotions, relying exclusively on their cognitive selves in their day to day lives.

> I didn't know what I felt, I didn't know why....I didn't know what was happening to me, why it was happening, why I was feeling what I was feeling.... (Paul)

Darlene, Tim and Maureen felt that they were in touch with their feelings however questioned their validity and often resisted expressing them. Brenda suggested that while somewhat in touch with certain negative emotions (angry and depression) she was not in touch with more positive emotions (happiness, love, kindness).

> I don't remember having that depth of feeling before. The only depth I could equate to that would be rage. I now have the depth of a positive feeling that I can equate. (Brenda)

Being able to feel the range of human emotions, to acknowledge their validity, and to express them appropriately was seen as being imperative to reaffirming self. The two men in the study expressed how they felt they were intellectually developed however lagged behind in emotional development. While validation of feelings was mentioned by all participants, the females in the study seemed to struggle more with requiring outside validation of their feelings by others.

> ...feelings about myself such that I didn't feel worthwhile, I didn't

> have the things that a person needs to be valued in our society, as a person and as a female.... beliefs that you had to have certain attributes to get ahead in the world to be valued by others. (Brenda)

Low self esteem towards valuing self

Other directed, self alienation, emotionally disintegrated all add up to equal low sense of self. This was evidenced again and again by participants stating how they felt they required outside validation of their thoughts, feelings, actions and goals. Deferring to others, ignoring personal needs and avoiding feelings were all behaviours that operated to perpetuated low self esteem.

> [A] belief that other people did things right, other people and other things were valued and I was the reverse of all that, priorities was always other people and never myself. (Brenda)

Often these behaviours originated in their family of origins and continued to be played out within other contexts. Today, the enhancement of a strong sense of self has become a priority for all of the participants in the study.

> I think I see things more in perspective and I think that I am in some ways able to priorize my work or whatever I'm doing. But I priorize from different criteria. I priorize it in order or importance to me rather

than in order of importance to deadlines...[or] others. (Darlene)

Although the goal of each participant today is to value and accept himself or herself, this continues to be an ongoing struggle for most of the participants. Paul describes his struggle this way:

> I think part of the problem now is that I'm always trying to improve...true the event has sparked a process that is good but I'm missing the boat! Instead of accepting myself and whoever I am, with my insecurities or whatever, I'm always trying to be somebody else.... (Paul)

Detachment towards connection

Five of the participants shared their feelings of detachment, to varying degrees, from others and their environment prior to their event. For Brenda and Paul, this detachment was most pronounced. Brenda's home was her haven, emphasizing her role as wife and mother which was played out almost exclusively within the boundaries of her house. She isolated herself from the outside world, establishing few friendships and little contact with family. For Paul, academic studies had been his focus since he was a small child. He avoided relations with others, almost every waking moment was consumed with studies. For both Paul and Brenda, these behavioral strategies had been adopted very young as a means of coping

with dysfunctional families.

Although involved in community activities, Sandy and Tim spoke of being emotionally detached from others. Personal friendships were either minimal or superficial and relationships with others were viewed as a means to achieve an outcome, and not valued in and of themselves.

> I held an affirmation for years and years....better to remain silent and not be a fool then to speak up and remove all doubt....I used to try and handle my role through silence. (Tim)

One of the most prominent learnings that occurred for each participant in the study was the significance attached to relationships, either existing or newly developed relationships. Through the process of reaching out to others and developing self awareness, personal relationships took on new meaning. There was an overwhelming sense from the participants that the learning process they had embarked on could not occur in isolation from others. Relationships with others were seen as a catalyst for personal learning throughout the process.

> One of the things that I notice was that a lot of reaching out to other people began, that was probably the chief thing. Prior to that there was a lot of isolation...everything that I learned involved other people...and the interactions with other people is what helped build

my self esteem. (Brenda)

As a result of exploring roles and patterns within their families, Sandy, Tim, Maureen and Darlene, were all motivated to develop better relationships with their family members. Sandy, Tim and Maureen shared how for the first time in their lives they were able to express open affection and love to either their parents or siblings.

> For me to even tell my sister...gee, I sure appreciate you and I sure love you and I miss you...I would have broken out in tears just to acknowledge those emotions even a little. It was not a part of me. So we've grown really close that way. (Tim)

Maureen and Darlene also stated how roles and relationships with their children and husbands were positively enhanced as a result of their life event.

> I think that's where it perhaps had to biggest impact ...acknowledging my children as adults....But I think it was a reassessment of roles, like, what are your views as a mother, what's a mother suppose to do. And when does one stop being a mother? (Darlene)

For Brenda and Paul, connecting with others was a painful and risky

step that they each have benefitted from. Brenda readily shares the powerful influence personal relationships was had on her life. There is a real sense that happiness comes from relating to self and relating to others.

> I know what happy is now, so because of that, I value what's in here and my relationships with people. (Brenda)

Materialistic towards nonmaterialistic

Changes in priorities, values and goals were identified by all. The participants stated how they had lived their lives ascribing to strong cultural beliefs and standards. The western image of success (family, good job, house, two cars, etc) motivated each participant prior to their event. Each gender adopted traditional roles for achieving this success, the women in the study became the good wife and mother, and the men pursued the education and job that would provide them with the respect and standard of living they desired.

> The perfect family...two cars and a dog...was very important to me.... [My life] was very much dictated by everything out there...beat the Jones kind of thing. (Maureen)

For each participant values and priorities changed to emphasize the nonmaterialistic aspects of life: family, personal relationships, personal

growth and awareness, a "slowing down to smell the roses", general everyday life experiences, God.

> Most of our marriage had been based on goals, financial goals...we wanted to have this and we wanted to have that. We got so focused on where we wanted to be that we lost each other along the way....I'm looking more at personal goals now rather than financial goals. And I'm sure that comes from the other side of shifting importance. As long as I'm growing as a person and I'm happy, it doesn't matter if I have all these financial rewards along the way. There are other rewards out there. (Sandy)

> Money isn't as important...it's getting less and less important although I still worry about being broke and destitute....My main value is to learn how...to love myself, learning to like myself, like the kind of person I am and not have to take a back seat to anyone. To become comfortable with who I am and to enjoy what I'm doing for a living. (Tim)

Phase Six: Contextual Awareness

A perceptual shift occurred for the participants as they proceeded through their learning process. As they began seeing themselves differently, they began to view their world differently.

> I definitely don't think the same way I did before. Absolutely not, and it's hard to explain how I think differently, it's really, really tough to explain, but I just don't look at things the same way anymore. (Sandy)

For Tim and Brenda, the world became more accepting and loving. For Sandy, the world offers a wealth of exciting opportunity. She suggests that her perspective has become less restrictive and more accepting of varying cultures, ideas and people.

An awareness that personal beliefs and assumptions are shaped by cultural, political, and social influences led some of the participants to begin examining and questioning the contexts in which they live. Both Tim and Paul stated that society's emphasis on competition and material gain has a powerful influence on people and can limit and restrict one's sense of self. An individual becomes valued by what they can achieve and how successfully they can play and win the game. These participants began questioning the validity and worth of buying into this belief and the repercussions that existed if an individual opts out.

> I don't think it is only my perception but it is a very material oriented society and it is hard to just be the little guy.... (Paul)

> Overall our society is very competitive...it's one person against the

> other in just about every aspect of life...especially in the job market...society makes us judge ourselves against the standards of society. (Tim)

Darlene and Maureen mentioned how their perceptions of the world were quite naive prior to their event, and how today they have developed a more critical perspective towards situations.

> [I'm aware] of the politics involved...I was so naive...I accepted what was given to me and I didn't question deeply enough the situation...[I have] more of an understanding of the [hidden agendas] that exist in any situation. (Darlene)

A prior sense of personal power was lacking for the participants, who did not reflect upon or question personal beliefs, assumptions and roles. Power was deferred to others, who were valued over self. They did not feel they had the right to even question expectations imposed by others. As the sense of personal power increased for participants, so did the belief that they had the right to question and change personal and environmental contexts. The development of a critically reflective perspective of the environment in which they live began to emerge. Darlene began questioning the political structure and games of educational institutions; Maureen questioned the power and control that is handed over to

educational and medical institutions; Paul and Tim questioned society's emphasis on competition and material gain; Brenda began questioning gender differences and equality issues.

> I see students saying that our goal is to change people and their behaviour to fit into the norms of society...well I believe that society can change and the norms can change....I get angry with a lot of the students, instructors and people in authority positions are out there to make people behave...and I can see the need for that but I want them to stop and look at the changes in society even over the last hundred years and say look at what we were doing then. Some of those things were absolutely appalling but we were doing it...and look what we are doing today and we know damn well that in a hundred years we are going to look back and say I can't believe we did that.... I want [people] to open their eyes to that....I want people to be aware that just because it is being done doesn't mean it's always right....(Maureen)

Discussion

Each member of the study felt he or she were at different phases of the process. Depending on what was occurring in their external environments and how this influenced their sense of self, they moved back and forth in each phase and on each continuum outlined. When asked

whether this learning process resulted in the development of a new self, the answer was no. Participants generally agreed that what the process allowed them to do was get in touch with and reaffirm their true self. Behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and values were re-aligned to conform to an increased awareness. Darlene describes it this way:

> The event didn't crumble my foundation because that would be like a disintegration....but rather is was like pasterseen and it was squished and I had to rebuild...so the matter was still here but it was reformed as opposed to being disintegrated and rebuild with new stuff...because I don't have any new stuff....it's the same old stuff but a different shape...I have the same husband, same children, basically the same socioeconomic standards.....rather it has been remoulded...I look at those same aspect but from a different perspectives...they are the same old blocks but in a different shape.... (Darlene)

For all participants a growing sense of contentment emerged. Perceptual shifts continually occurred for participants resulting in a more open, accepting, flexible, and relaxed attitude towards life in general. Cognitive learning can be seen in the changed thoughts, beliefs and assumptions held by the participants. Likewise, participants state that they

generally feel happier, confident, and more self assured today than ever before in their lives -- attributing this to the affective learning that occurred.

What is evident is the intertwining of cognitive and affective learning at each phase of the process. It appears that in personal learning experiences, one does not happen in isolation of the other. While cognitive perspectives change and perceptual shifts occur frequently within significant personal learning experiences, one continues to be struck with the very real emotional pain and turmoil that accompanies cognitive learning. Affective learning appears to be required for cognitive learning to be consolidated.

CHAPTER FOUR

IMPACT OF THE LIFE EVENT ON THE PARTICIPANTS TODAY

The second part of the research question that guided this study will be examined in this chapter. The significant personal learnings that resulted from the participants' critical life events were explored in chapter three. The impact of the event and subsequent learnings on six areas of the participants' lives will be discussed in this chapter. The life spheres of significant relationships, work, leisure, spirituality, health and community were explored.

Participants were asked to discuss what they saw as the connection between their personal learning about self and the resulting changes that occurred in their lives. Participants unanimously agreed that the increased personal awareness that resulted from their critical life event was responsible for the concrete changes that occurred in their lives.

> Impact in each area ties back to self...each area that I had problems with before was a lack of knowing myself, and what I wanted and how to get what I wanted, and deal with others in relation to me. (Sandy)

> The learning about self is what caused the changes and impacts to occur in the other spheres in my life...I can't see these possibly

happening without a sense of self...changes in family resulted in an awareness of self...not real changes in self but an awareness of who I was... (Maureen)

In the process of data collection and analysis, six life spheres were identified jointly by the researcher and participants as having been impacted by the life event. These include the following: significant relationships, work, leisure, spirituality, health, and community.

Significant relationships

This sphere encompasses all relationships that are perceived as significant by the participant -- family, friends, co-workers, children, spouses, partners etc. As was outlined in Chapter Three, the role of relationships in the participants' lives took on new meaning. Prior to their events, personal relationships did not hold the significance and value that they now receive.

As part of the journey into self, participants reflected upon the roles and patterns that existed both within their family of origin and with their spouses and children. Though some relationships were severed at this time, those that remained became one of the main focuses in each participant's life. Four of the six participants initiated new relationships with their parents that were more open and honest. For Maureen and Darlene,

their interactions with their husbands and children changed to accommodate more healthy and loving relationships.

Likewise, four of the six participants emphasized the role friendships had taken on in their lives. By letting go of fears and insecurities and sharing openly and honestly with others, close and involved friendships developed.

> There is a real sense of how much in my life hinges on relationships, possibly because I had no relationships for so long. Now I can see what can happen in relationships and it is really nice, it is such a big area for me. (Sandy)

Work

Prior to the critical life event, work represented an activity that was undertaken to gain money and prestige. It was more important to make money than to have a job that was meaningful or worthwhile. This belief was espoused by all the participants. If they themselves were not employed, they supported their partners in similar pursuits. These beliefs generally originated in their families of origin and were reinforced by the environments in which they lived.

Today, each participant espouses a new belief and has made changes in his/her life to accommodate this. It is now perceived to be of

more importance to have meaningful and worthwhile work than to make money. Tim, Paul, Brenda and Maureen returned to post secondary studies in order to either initiate or change a career direction that would accommodate this new belief. Although Sandy and Darlene were already enrolled in university at the time of their events, the value they have attached to their degrees and subsequent work has also changed. Four of the six enrolled in programs within the field of human services.

> Work now for me is something that adds a measure of meaning in my life ... it is not something for acquiring money, it is a method of reaching out and giving...it is something that is more self fulfilling than money. (Brenda)

> Over the years I always thought there was something more to work that I've been missing out on...I've been wondering whether I can have satisfying work...If I'm blinded by money I may not find it but going after personal satisfaction it is more likely.... In a round about way I'm hoping the money will come but it is not the main focus in my life...it was at one time and that didn't work. (Tim)

Leisure

All six of the participants stated that leisure had not been a significant part of their childhood or adult lives prior to their events. Five of the six

stated that they never allowed themselves to just relax. If permitted at all, leisure consisted of productive activities such as building something or house/yard work.

Today, Paul still struggles with giving himself permission to relax and engage in leisure activities. For the other five, leisure has become a central component of their lives. While Tim and Sandy relate to leisure from an activity perspective, Maureen, Darlene, and Brenda relate to leisure as a daily ingredient that is directly linked to their sense of self, spirituality and work.

> Now leisure is sort of everyday. When you like yourself and you like what your doing work isn't work anymore...leisure is sort of all the time...it becomes a lifestyle....The word leisure means to me relaxation, enjoyment, fulfilment, give me a break from routine...everyday is more leisure than before, it is more a state of being than an activity. (Maureen)

> Before there was no leisure....Now there is a complete switch. [Leisure], spirituality and self is connected. If I do the kinds of things that I want to do in the work sphere of my life, they drain me. I very much need the spirituality and leisure aspect to fill the tanks again...it is a matter of balance. (Brenda)

Spirituality

No attempt was undertaken to derive a common definition of the word spirituality for the purposes of this study. Each participant derived and shared their own definition and the personal meaning and relevance they attached to spirituality. What is of relevance to this study is that all participants stated that the area of spirituality, as they understood it, was affected by their critical life event.

All participants, with the exception of Maureen, had been affiliated with organized religion during childhood. For Paul, this exposure had been to Eastern religions while living in India. Immediately prior to their events, only Tim still attended church regularly. Maureen and Paul stated that they had never thought a lot about spirituality prior to their event. Darlene, Sandy, Brenda stated that they had been disillusioned by the traditional indoctrination they had been exposed to as children and had consciously chosen to discontinue prior affiliations.

For Brenda, the area of spirituality had a tremendous influence on her life as her critical life event was her "spiritual revelation". Her subsequent religious affiliations, friendships, work, leisure, sense of self, and perspective on life have all been shaped by her personal relationship with God.

> Those things that relate to spiritual values are what is really important to me. Because to me, and for me they are the balancing

point. (Brenda)

Both Darlene and Maureen stated that as they worked through their learning process, they found that they needed to develop some belief system or sense of spirituality that worked for them. Though very personal and individual, their subsequent understanding of spirituality share some similarities. Both are not associated with organized religion and are strongly tied to their sense of self.

> I acknowledge spirituality in more of a cognitive sense, a mind - body connection. The event forced me to come to terms with this mind - body thing...thinking, being, accepting that which is and not being bothered by that which I cannot change. (Darlene)

> Today spirituality means just being OK with what ever is... (Maureen)

Paul's search for clarity has taken him back to exploring Eastern religions approaches to spirituality. For Paul, spirituality is now synonymous with one's sense of self, one's spiritual self. Spirituality involves getting in touch with and being true to one's spiritual self which resides within each of us.

Sandy continues to search for a sense of spirituality that makes sense to her. She feels a strong pull to incorporate a sense of congruency in her life as it relates to spirituality. Tim's struggle is less pronounced,

however he is also questioning different aspects of what spirituality means to him.

Health

Again the area of health was strongly influenced for all the participants by their critical life event. Maureen was the only participant that was conscious of health prior to her event, something she attributes to being a diabetic. For the other five, health was something they worried about for others and "was a minor inconvenience". Today, all six of the participants state that health, both physical and emotional, has become a priority in their lives. Each sees a clear connection between physical and emotional health and one's sense of self. Prior neglect of health was attributed to neglect of self.

> [I] never thought about health before, it was a minor inconvenience. Now I think about what is good for me...and that ties in to tuning more into self...the connection between mind and body... (Darlene)

> I do believe that there is a connection between mental health and physical health. I feel healthier now than before all this happened in an emotional and physical sense as well. (Maureen)

> Health...[was] very much impacted....I never thought I had to feed

myself...I could go all day and realise I never ate...I've decided that it is worth being late for work to have a bowl of cereal...I never ate fruit, now I eat one fruit a day and tune into what does my body need today...I take multivitamins every day....[It's] tied in with taking care of self... (Tim)

Community

Participants were asked to reflect on their sense of connection to the larger community. Although this life sphere was somewhat ambiguous for most of the participants, there was a sense that a changed sense of self influenced their interactions with the larger community. This sphere was viewed as being in the process of development for most of the participants and was mentioned in connection with phase six (contextual awareness) of the learning process.

Participants suggested that prior involvement with community was often undertaken out of a sense of obligation (often associated with the parenting role) or through the initiation of others (spouses or family). For Brenda, community was seen as the oppressor. Today, each participant is working towards community involvement being more of an extension of self.

Paul stated he had no sense of connection with the larger community, partly because of cultural differences, however, mainly due to his struggle to develop and maintain his own sense of self. Tim and Sandy

felt they presently had a limited connection with community however, present involvement is seen as being significant. Sandy's volunteer involvement has shifted towards working with people her own age, giving presentations on healthy eating and AIDS. This shift in focus is related to Sandy's experience of physical deterioration after her separation. Tim has become very involved in a dance group which he has used as an opportunity to overcome personal fears of failure and anxiety about interacting with others. He is presently involved in teaching dance and competing in dance competitions.

> Community contact I do get now is more significant because it is initiated by me...I decide what I'm going to do and what I'm not going to do ... more a sense of power and control... (Tim)

For Maureen, community involvement has changed from an obligation to an extension of herself. After the death of her daughter, Maureen and her husband became very involved in a community support group, of which they are now the chapter leaders.

> Today community involvement is an extension of myself, who I am and what I want to do. (Maureen)

Brenda's sense of community has been the most profoundly effected. She

is actively involved in various community and religious support groups.

> I suppose community had a role before as oppression and now it is something that I can take part in, that I can change or have a part in changing...and even if it doesn't change I can have my say so... (Brenda)

Discussion

The impact of the cognitive and affective learning that resulted from the participants' critical life events has had extraordinary repercussions. Every sphere of their lives has been touched and transformed in some way. As one participant suggested, an individual's self resides within the hub of the wheel of life. A critical life event is likened to a stone tossed into a pool of water, small ripples wash over every aspect of the individual and his/her world. This alone attests to the powerful significance of personal learning experiences, not only for the individual but for the context and environment in which he or she lives.

CHAPTER FIVE

REFLECTIONS ON RELEVANT LITERATURE

The focus of this study was on the transformative learning experiences that resulted from critical life events. Emphasis was placed on informal personal learning, which involves an active processing of the event -- the ability to reflect upon the experience and its relevance &/or significance in the individual's life. Four categories have been developed that form a structure for reviewing the literature relevant to this study. The following areas will be discussed: (a) Life Events/Life Transitions; (b) Adult Learning; (c) Adult Development; and (d) Role of Reflection in Learning.

For the purposes of this study, adult learning and development is viewed within a life event framework. Although the majority of the literature written on life events and transitions stem from research in disciplines other than education, this literature is explored as the findings are relevant to this study. Learning theories, particularly those theories that focus on informal learning from experience are explored. Existing research into significant learning in adulthood is also addressed.

The potential for growth and development to arise from life events is discussed. In order for a life event to enhance adult development, reflection on the event and its significance is required. Therefore, the role of

reflection in significant learning in adulthood has been included within this literature review.

This review is limited to the areas outlined and is not intended to provide an inclusive discussion of all relevant theorists. Rather, specific current writers have been emphasized who have been accepted in the field as having comprehensive and well developed ideas &/or theories. At the end of each category, the data and findings of this study are discussed and viewed through the framework of relevant theorists.

Life events/life transitions

Critical life events are defined as any event, internal or external to the individual that is perceived as significant in his/her life. Kimmel (1990) refers to life events as milestones and defines them as "an event (not a general goal) that stands out in one's memory, or in one's future plans, as a significant turning point, marker, or personal reference point" (p. 9).

Life events of significant potency often initiate personal and social transitions (Golan, 1981; Bridges, 1980). Robert Weiss tried to draw a distinction between the terms "crisis" and "transitions." "Crises", he suggested, involved a situation of sudden onset, limited duration, and considerable stress. The crisis ends either in a return to the pre-crisis situation or in a persisting disruption, which Weiss terms a "transition state".

Critical life events may be considered normative or non-normative, positive or negative, anticipated or unanticipated. All critical life events may be viewed as stressors to the extent that they require a change in the individual's normal patterns of behaviour. Fiske and Chiriboga (1990) suggest that one of the reasons life events may be considered stressful is due to their ability to disrupt not only the day-to-day routine but social relationships and social expectations.

Normative life events such as marriage, birth of a child, job change, or relocation, often call for a re-priorizing of roles or the adoption of new roles. The timing of a normative life event (or likewise, the nonoccurrence of a event we had hoped for -- the marriage or the promotion that didn't occur) is central to the stability of adult life (Merriam & Clark, 1991; Hultsch & Deutsch, 1981; Golan, 1981). Non-normative or idiosyncratic life events, those which are unanticipated and unplanned, can be both individual and societal. Unplanned individual events may include such things as an unexpected death, loss of a job, divorce etc. Societal events may include a natural disaster, social uprising, war etc (Golan, 1981; Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; Moos, 1986).

A great deal of literature has been written on the negative mental and physical health effects of stressful life events. Studies such as Ford & Procidano's (1990) have found that a positive relationship exists between psychological disturbance and life stress, which they define as any event or

cumulative set of events occurring within a specified period of time that produces a change in one's life. However, there is a growing body of research that considers life events and transitions as triggers for personal growth and development. In fact, critical life events often provide an important condition for psychological development.

The argument for stressful life events as a life force dynamic is being advanced not only in theory but in basic and applied research as well. Schulz and Rau suggests that "at the most basic level, the life course can be defined as the major life events and transitions an individual experiences between birth and death" (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; p. 145).

Several researchers have found that when asked to identify turning points in their lives, respondents tend to invoke stressful transitions as initiators of significant personal development and change in their life course trajectory (Golan, 1981; Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; Moos, 1986; Kanchier & Unruh, 1988; Rutter, 1989; Smyer, 1984). Bridges (1980) links transitions to growth, since a transition is "the natural process of disorientation and reorientation that marks the turning points of the path of growth...with this growth involving periodic accelerations and transformations" (p. 5). Musgrove (1977) found that his respondents reported to "have stored their 'real' selves until a crisis or changed set of circumstances allowed these to emerge...They came to define themselves in terms of newly assumed identities, some of which had previously been flirted with, some of which

were wholly new" (Boud & Griffin, 1987; p. 65). According to Hoyck and Hoyer (1982) "conflicts [arising from life events] are not seen as undesirable interruptions in the course of development but as the very crux of development" (p. 221).

Whether normative or non-normative, positive or negative, critical life events and resulting transitions appear to exhibit common attributes. Golan (1981) states that all life transitions produce a uniform pattern of response: first, a psychological and physical turmoil; second, a painful preoccupation with the past; third, a period of remobilization, activity, and adjustment. Bridges (1980) also views transitions as incorporating three distinct phases: (1) an ending, followed by (2) a period of confusion and distress, leading to (3) a new beginning. He contends that in order for a transitional state to be growth promoting, each of the three phases must be worked through to completion. One cannot focus on a new beginning until mourning the loss of what was. As Rutter (1989) suggests, "Life transitions have to be considered both as end products of past processes and as instigators of future ones" (p. 46).

A significant common denominator in life transitions, is that they encompass a bridging period, often marked by feelings of disequilibrium, ambiguity and uncertainty (Golan, 1981; Moos, 1986). Bridges (1980) uses the following analogy to capture the essence of life transitions:

> It is as if we launched out from a riverside dock to cross to a landing on the opposite shore -- only to discover in midstream that the landing was no longer there. (And when we looked back at the other shore, we saw that the dock we left from had just broken loose and was heading downstream). Stuck in transition between situations, relationships and identities that are themselves in transition, many Americans are caught in a semipermanent condition of transitionality. (p. 4)

The ambiguity and uncertainty sparks a process of adaptation and reorganization, both in one's inner and outer worlds, during which basic shifts in thinking, feeling, and behaving are often made (Golan, 1981). As Kanchier & Unruh (1988) state, "The major tasks of these periods are to reexamine need and value hierarchies, to take another look at various life components such as occupation and relationships, to explore and evaluate potential options, and to make decisions to either deepen or alter earlier commitments" (p. 127). Choices are, in a sense, the major product of transitions (Levinson, 1986).

Relevance for present study

The literature written on life transitions is particularly relevant to the findings of this study. Although this literature is often viewed from a mental

health perspective, examining the literature written on life transitions from an adult learning and development perspective enhances the understanding of the transition process.

The non-normative critical life events experienced by the participants in this study initiated both personal and social transitions that led to personal growth and development. Their learning process incorporated Golan's (1981) stages of transitions: psychological and physical turmoil; preoccupation with the past, and; remobilization and adjustment. As well, the bridging period of disequilibrium, ambiguity, and uncertainty that both Golan (1981) and Bridges (1980) describe was experienced by the participants in the first four phases of their learning process, particularly phase three.

The research completed by Fiske and Chiriboga (1990), Moos (1986), Kanchier and Unruh (1988), Musgrove (1977) and others into identity reformation as a result of life events is also appropriate. Participants identified their critical life event as turning points in their lives that prompted the formation of new identities, priorities and goals. As Kanchier and Unruh (1988) suggest, participants reevaluated values and needs, often choosing to renegotiate prior commitments. Priorities changed with an increasing emphasis placed on higher order values and personal relationships.

Adult Learning

Most theories of adult learning can either be subsumed under adult development literature or literature written on learning psychology (Cross, 1981; Mezirow, 1991). The psychology of adult learning literature is focused on in this section.

Three categories have been developed by Hultsch and Pentz (1980) to describe the historical shifts in basic research in the psychology of adult learning: associative bond theories; information processing theories; and contextual theories.

Association bond theories were dominant in the 1950s which emphasized learning as a result of stimulus-response bonds. Information processing theories, which became dominant in the 1960s, focused on the transferring of memory from sensory to short and long term storage structures (Hultsch & Pentz, 1980). Learning was not seen as a set of stimulus-response associations, rather as an "active totality that we organize through the various processing mechanisms" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 9). Contextual theories have emerged recently that "see experience as events that have a meaning as a whole...what is learned and remembered depends on the various contexts of the event" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 9). As learning from critical life events was the focus of this study, this section will be limited to contextual theorists, particularly those theorists who focus on informal learning from experience. Jarvis (1987) and Mezirow (1990, 1991)

will be discussed in detail as both of these theories are well developed and offer comprehensive insights.

Contextual theorists believe that all learning begins with experience. It is not so much what happens to the individual as how the individual perceives, feels, thinks and reacts to the experience that influences learning (Merriam & Clark, 1991). Dewey (1938) examined the "organic connection between education and personal experience" (p. 12). He suggested that while not all experience educates, present experiences must be connected with previous experiences in order to be meaningful. "To 'learn from experience' is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we suffer from things in consequence" (Dewey, 1961, p. 140).

Kolb (1984) built on Dewey's ideas and developed a four-stage cyclical model of learning: (1) concrete experience; (2) reflective observation; (3) abstract conceptualization; and (4) active experimentation. Both Dewey and Kolb suggest there is an intrinsic connection between learning and problem solving (Merriam & Clark, 1991; Jarvis, 1987).

Recently Jarvis (1987) has explored the relationship of experience and learning from a social perspective. He believes that learning is not just a psychological process but is intimately related to the social context. As learning occurs within a social context, and "the learner is also to some extent a social construct...learning should be regarded as a social

phenomenon as well as an individualistic one" (Jarvis, 1987, p. 15). According to Jarvis (1987), "Learning is a process of transforming experience into knowledge, skills and attitudes" (p. 16). It may be viewed as a process or product; it may be cognitive &/or affective; and it may result in, but cannot be identified with, behavioral change (Jarvis, 1987).

Jarvis (1987) suggests that, at least to some degree, individuals are a reflection of the social structure. However, cultural impressions are not merely imprinted on the individual, "rather there is a process of thought and then, also one of externalization. Hence, individuals actually modify what is received and it is the changed version that is subsequently transmitted to other people in social interaction" (p. 14).

Jarvis (1987) has devised a model of learning that incorporates nine potential learning responses, which may be divided into three categories: non-learning responses; nonreflective learning responses; and reflective learning responses. What determines the learning response is the individual's ability to ascribe meaning to the experience. If meaning can be easily ascribed, responses will be in the manner which they have previously learned -- hence, a non-learning response. If the experience is unfamiliar, there is a disjuncture between the experience and the individual's biography, a potential learning experience exists (Jarvis, 1987).

There is no human growth without learning and so the human

> condition must always be one in which there is a the potential for disjuncture between biography and experience and growth occurs when the disjuncture is mastered and learning has occurred. The mixture of taken-for-grantedness and disjuncture is essential to human growth and development. (Jarvis, 1987, p. 81)

While Dewey, Kolb and Jarvis focus on the relationship between learning and life experience, others focus more on how learning from life experiences lead to personal growth and development. Gould (1978), Mezirow (1990, 1991), Kegan (1982) and Daloz (1986) suggest that adult learning and development has more to do with the "transformation" of experience versus the accumulation of knowledge. The most developed theory to date that attempts to explain how learning from life experiences relates to adult development, has been advanced by Mezirow (Merriam & Clark, 1991).

Karl Popper was one of the first to suggest that we learn in order to change the structure of our experiences rather than fill in gaps in knowledge (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow has built on his ideas to develop a theory he calls transformative learning.

Mezirow's theory focuses on how our frames of reference (meaning perspectives) are formed and transformed. He suggests that all human beings operate from meaning structures that contain our personal beliefs

and values, as well as social norms and expectations (Merriam & Clark, 1991). Mezirow (1991) suggests that there are three types of meaning perspectives that influence how we interact and view the world: (1) epistemic -- "the way we know and the uses that we make of knowledge" (p. 43); (2) sociolinguistic -- social and cultural roles and norms; and (3) psychological -- personal inhibitions and perceptions of self. Each of these types include cognitive, conative and affective dimensions (Mezirow, 1991).

These meaning structures act as lenses through which we filter and interpret our experiences. When the experience is congruent with past experiences and existing perspectives, it is assimilated. If the experience is incongruent, it may either be rejected or may result in a "disorienting dilemma." Through the process of critical reflection, either a reaffirmation or transformation of existing meaning perspectives may occur (Mezirow, 1990).

Mezirow (1990) coined the phase perspective transformation to refer to a process of:

> becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; or reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new

understandings. (p.14)

Mezirow (1981) believes there are two paths to perspective transformation, the first through sudden insight of existing anomalies, the second through a series of life transitions. Although perspective transformations can occur as a result of an accumulation of changed meaning schemes, more predictably they occur in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1990).

A recent study by Merriam and Clark (1991), also suggests there is an intrinsic connection between life events and learning in adulthood (p. 217). They suggest that "it is not the events in and of themselves... but the learning that we derive from these events that shape our lives" (p. 217).

Until recently, the psychological impact of critical life events were explored almost exclusively from a negative perspective. It is not surprising therefore, that adult educators have also only recently begun to consider the significant learning that can occur from life events (Mezirow, 1990).

Relevance for present study

The outcomes of the learning process the participants described in this study correspond with Mezirow's (1991) definition of transformative learning. Old meaning perspectives were transformed through a process of critical reflection. However, the findings of this study suggest a

contextual view of learning similar to that presented by Jarvis (1987). The learning process and the impact experienced by the participants were embedded within the contexts in which they lived. In order to fully understand the meaning participants attached to their transformative learning experiences, an understanding of the environment in which they occurred was necessary. This differs from Mezirow's (1991) theory which views transformative learning as an individual, internal and generic process of learning. While Mezirow acknowledges the social, cultural and political influences on the formation of meaning perspectives, the emphasis is on an individual versus a social process of learning.

The data collected for this study suggest that transformative learning is more a social process involving an inter-dependent relationship between the individual and their social and cultural environment. The learning was impacted by and in turn impacted the social environment that surrounded each participant. Participants' assumptions, presuppositions and meaning perspectives were formed, ascribed and assimilated within the context of their family of origin and the social, political and cultural environment in which they lived. They were not formed by the individual in isolation. Each of the women in the study stated that the focus in their lives prior to their critical life event was on meeting the needs and expectation of others (family, friends), emphasizing the caregiving role. The two men in the sample felt that their prior focus had been on achievement, either through

school or work. They were driven by the desire to achieve the pre-prescribed image of success in our society: material possessions, a good job, a family. All participants felt that they were socialized and rewarded for adopting these roles which were often performed with little reflection. In the process of playing out these roles, both the men and women felt they lost touch with their real selves. Their critical life events provided them with the opportunity to question and change roles and expectations that had been socially ascribed.

Viewing transformative learning as a social rather than an individual process challenges the validity of Mezirow's (1991) premise of transformative learning being a generic process of learning -- generic, referring to being common to all. From the researcher's perspective, the commonalities of experience that emerged within this study do not represent nor imply a generic process of learning. One must not disregard the similarities within the environments of the participants. All of the participants were middle class and educated, living and interacting within communities that provided and supported a comparable perspective of life. Each were able to access professional services or support groups that were influential in his/her process of learning. One could argue that their experiences were similar due to their similar environments.

Another premise upon which Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative theory rests is that all individuals retain the decisive ability

and power to change distorted meaning perspectives. When viewed as an individual internal process of cognitive learning, this assumption may be acceptable. However, when transformative learning is viewed as a social process involving cognitive and affective components, the assumption that all individuals have the power and opportunity to explore, challenge and change meaning perspectives and resulting behaviour is debateable. While power and opportunity may not have presented insurmountable barriers for the participants in this study, these variable can not be overlooked. Social structures and experiences provided the participants the opportunity and support to view their reality from different perspectives and act upon the resulting insight. One can only speculate that these experiences would have been different had they occurred in another country or culture that did not challenge the participants existing perspectives or provide the same support. Further research is required to explore the relationship between social context and transformative learning experiences.

Mezirow (1991) suggests that there are three types of meaning perspectives: epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological. In the process of exploring their personal meaning perspectives, the participants in this study identified two types of meaning perspectives that seemed to influence their behaviour: individual and social. Both of these types of meaning perspectives were developed and influenced by the individual's social context, however, the focus differs slightly. Individual meaning

perspectives emphasized the participants' perception of "self", and were formed by the individual based on past experience. Social meaning perspectives consisted of those "ascribed" beliefs and values dictated by the society in which the participants lived, particularly in relation to "self within the world". For the most part, these social meaning perspectives had been uncritically assimilated in childhood and acted as filters through which the participants assigned meaning to their experience. The similarity between Mezirow's sociolinguistic and psychological and the participant's individual and social are evident.

While the exploration and transformation of individual meaning perspectives were experienced by the participants, examining and challenging social meaning perspectives -- or ways of acting and being in the world -- created a great deal of struggle and controversy for the participants. For the participants of this study, the process of identifying "distorted" meaning perspectives focused more on transforming socially ascribed beliefs that were no longer congruent with the individual's perception of self, than on changing individual meaning perspectives. Transformative learning was enhanced with the individual's ability to transcend social and cultural roles and expectations.

Adult Development

Several frameworks have been developed for viewing adult

psychosocial change and development. The most common means of viewing developmental change is through stage or phase theorists such as Erikson (1963), Gould (1978), Levinson (1986), Loevinger (1976), Sheeby (1976) and Kolhberg (1973). Stage developmentalists view maturation as a hierarchical progression towards the development of a more complex and integrated selfhood. Life cycle theorists see development as a horizontal progression and focus on individuals reaction to changing age and social expectations throughout adulthood (Cross, 1981). Both approaches focus on the tasks or crisis that adults must accommodate in order to successfully move on to the next phase or stage of development (Merriam & Clark, 1991).

An alternative framework for understanding adulthood is the concept of life events (Merriam & Clark, 1991). Critical life events, as explored in this study, are non-scheduled, non-normative events which are not the consequences of life-cycle or life-stage transitions and are generally unexpected in one's life (Louis, 1985). These events act as triggers for the resulting learning, change and development that can be associated with life transitions. For the purposes of this study, the potential for adult development will be viewed through the framework of life events and resulting transitions.

Though the emphasis and focus differ for stage &/or phase theorists, each incorporate the relevance of life transitions into their theories. Piaget

first recognized that life transitions are required to shift from one structure (stage) to another. He treated transitions as zones of ambiguity between the stages, rather than stages in their own right (Levinson, 1986). Psychodynamic approaches focus on the resolution of internal conflicts or crises (Erikson, 1963) and generally recognize transitions as the time when unresolved issues from prior crises arise. Developmental approaches emphasize the completion of various tasks corresponding to different developmental or chronological levels (Levinson, 1986). Transitional phases are acknowledged as essential, each with their own developmental tasks. Sociological approaches to transitions focus on role changes and shifts, Riley & Waring, and Duvall being advocates of this approach (Golan, 1981).

The dialectic approach to psychosocial development (Hoyck & Hoyer, 1982) suggests that growth and development arises out of conflicts that occur when the individual's biological and socio-cultural needs are incongruent. "Such conflicts are not seen as undesirable interruptions in the course of development but as the very crux of development" (Hoyck & Hoyer, 1982; p. 221).

Both Kanchier and Unruh (1988) and Hoyck and Hoyer (1982) advocate a dialectic approach to adult development and suggest a connection between external events and self identity formation in adulthood:

> Throughout life, your external and internal systems interact to influence your identity or personality (p. 91). Your identity is never static. Each time you pass through a transition phase and re-evaluate your values and goals, you are reformulating your identity. (Kanchier & Unruh, 1988; p. 98)

Or as Hoyck and Hoyer (1982) suggest,

> Identity crisis may occur whenever enduring beliefs about the self and one's place in the world are seriously challenged to the extent the individual no longer knows what he or she stands for. The challenge may spring from internal or external sources, or both. (p. 212)

Transitional states have also been shown to influence moral and intellectual development. Marienau & Chickering (1982) suggest moral development occurs as the result of experiences which encourage the "individual to turn their reflective thought inward to examine their own constructions and their responses to experience" (p. 21), a process that is central to the transition phase. Also, Perry (1968) suggests appropriate challenges under adequate conditions can stimulate intellectual growth in adult years. Researchers such as Marienau and Chickering (1982) state,

"that the dynamics involved in transition from one stage to the next are more representative of an individual's development than is the individual's place in any one of the hierarchial stages" (p. 20). "Regarding moral and intellectual development, the drama is in the transition" (Marienau & Chickering, 1982; p. 20).

Moos (1986) suggests that stressful life episodes can promote cognitive integration and stimulate personal growth by enriching the individual's beliefs and values, and by expanding their repertoire of coping skills. "In this view, life crises impel the development of new cognitive and personal skills primarily because such skills are needed for effective adaptation" (Moos, 1986, p. 10).

According to Mezirow (1981), perspective transformations that result from critical reflection, appear to be the best account for the process of transitions between stages of adult psychological development in major life-span theories:

> A heightened sense of critical reflectivity is crucial to Erikson's "identity crisis" of late adolescence and to "integrity" in adulthood. It is probably the factor in Lawrence Kolhberg's adult stage of principled morality which separates this stage from those which precede it. Clearly, this is what Gould is writing about in movement through adult life stages and what Levinson sees as operant in

moving through the psychosocial "seasons" of adulthood. (p. 13)

Mezirow (1991) regards the transformation of perspectives as "the central process in adult development" (p. 151) and has outlined a ten step process that an individual engages in during a perspective transformation:

> (1) a disorienting dilemma; (2) self examination; (3) a critical assessment of personally internalized role assumptions and a sense of alienation from traditional social expectations; (4) relating one's discontent to similar experiences of others or to public issues; (5) exploring options for new ways of acting; (6) building competence and self confidence in new roles; (7) planning a course of action; (8) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; (9) provisional efforts to try new roles and to assess feedback; and (10) a reintegration into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective. (Mezirow, 1981; p. 7)

A recent study by Merriam and Clark (1991) into significant learning in adulthood found that although not all significant learning is transformative, those experiences that were identified as transformative "advance the developmental process by significantly enlarging a person's meaning

schemes, leading to a superior meaning perspective" (p. 200).

Much of the research into significant personal learning refers to a similar process outlined by Mezirow. Research by Keane (1985), Baker (1986), Daloz (1986), Brookfield (in Boud & Griffin, 1987) and Merriam and Clark (1991) suggest that these transformations, whether sudden or gradual, are particularly meaningful experiences, and can result in significant changes in the individual's life.

Keane (1985) researched the doubting process experienced by religious men, and states the following:

> Doubting is part of life's larger process of continual adjustment of perspectives, beliefs, values and meaning. It is a process of transition and transformation. It is better described as a journey into self, a spiralling deeper and deeper as meaning perspectives are challenged by contradictory evidence from the world and reformed in the cycle of the doubting process. (p. 197)

He devised a learning process that includes four phases: disorientation; search for meaning and peace; self acceptance; and integration (Keane, 1985).

Baker's (1986) research into the self-transformational process of young adult males and Brookfield's (in Boud & Griffin, 1987) research into

personal learning in intimate relationships found significant learning involves a disorienting experience, critical self-reflection, and reorientation process.

Daloz (1986) researched the transformative experiences within formal education:

> Nothing is different, yet all is transformed. It is seen differently....Our old life is still there, but its meaning has profoundly changed because we have left home, seen it from afar, and been transformed by that vision. You can't go home again. (p. 26)

Research into significant personal learning has to date, focused almost exclusively on cognitive developmental changes. Although the emotional component of significant learning is acknowledged to the extent that feelings about the critical life event should be identified (Mezirow, 1991; Jarvis, 1987; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985), little emphasis has been placed on the affective learning that can occur from critical life events. Although Mezirow (1990, 1991) suggests that the process of perspective transformation may be emotionally dramatic, he focuses almost exclusively on the rational cognitive decisions that initiate and empower the process. The role emotions play in transformative learning is better acknowledged by Keane (1985) who states:

> The doubting journey into self involves learning from stressful, emotion laden experiences and it will be difficult because the learning is never simply cognitive....Integrated acceptance of new perspectives demands emotional as well as cognitive freedom from old perspectives and realities. (p.193, 204)

Relevance for present study

The critical life events and resulting transitions as experienced by the participants in this study promoted both affective and cognitive learning and development. This differs from Mezirow's (1991) theory which emphasizes the development of more integrated, permeable, discriminating cognitive meaning perspectives as the outcome of transformative learning. While the development of superior cognitive structures was an outcome of the transformative learning experiences of the participants, they were but one component. For the participants within this study, a more holistic transformation and reaffirmation of every aspect of self was experienced.

Cognitively identifying and restructuring inappropriate or "distorted" assumptions appeared to be only one step in the process of transformative learning as experienced by the participants. The affective learning that was required to consolidate the new cognitive perspective was the real stumbling block. Participants continually talked about slipping backwards, feeling like they were starting their learning process all over again. Even though they

could cognitively identify changed meaning perspectives, sharing how their thinking and beliefs had changed, they were not able to act upon their cognitive learning until they had engaged in affective learning. Learning how to identify, explore, validate, and express affect was a predominant component of transformative learning for the participants in this study.

The process of perspective transformation as outlined by Mezirow (1987) identifies a similar process as that experienced by the participants. The women in his study who were returning to pursue post secondary studies in nursing, experienced a process of self reflection, connecting with others, adopting new competencies and roles, and reintegration into society on the basis of new perspectives. Once again however, the differences lies in the focus of the learning process. The present study acknowledged a more social process of learning versus Mezirow's (1987) emphasis on an individual and internal process. Likewise, Keane's (1985) four phase learning process, though similar to that experienced by the participants in this study, is also viewed as an individual internal process.

Role of Reflection in Learning

The role of reflection in learning has been discussed by several researchers (Jarvis, 1987; Mezirow, 1990, 1991; Brookfield, 1987; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1983; Argyris, 1982; Freire, 1970). Jarvis (1987) suggests that experience in and of itself

is not meaningful until an individual reflects upon it. Mezirow (1990) states:

> Perhaps even more central to adult learning than elaborating established meaning schemes is the process of reflecting back on prior learning to determine what we have learned is justified under present circumstances. This is a crucial learning process egregiously ignored by learning theorists. (p. 5)

Dewey (1938) suggested that two experiential processes which lead to learning involve trial and error and reflective activity. He considered that reflection involves an integration of attitudes and skills in a method of inquiry. Boud et al. (1985) gives much greater emphasis to the affective role in reflection.

> Reflection in the context of learning is a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experience in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations. (Boud et al., p. 19)

Reflection is considered an intentional conscious activity that can be directed to a variety of ends. "[Reflective activities] can be directed towards exploring organized knowledge, towards self-exploration, or examining the

natural and human environment or context in which the learner is operating" (Boud et al., 1985, p. 24). Schon (1983) states that an individual can reflect upon the tacit norms and appreciations that underlie a judgement; on the strategies and theories implicit in a pattern of behaviour; on the feeling that has led him/her to adopt a particular course of action; the way he/she framed the problem he/she is trying to solve; and on the role he/she has constructed for himself/herself.

Boud et al. (1985) suggest that reflective learning has three stages: return to the experience; attending to feelings; and re-evaluating experience. They state that reflection may occur at various points: at the start, in anticipation of the experience; during the experience; and following the experience.

Mezirow (1981) outlines seven levels of reflective activity: (1) reflection; (2) affective reflection; (3) discriminant reflection; (4) judgemental reflection; (5) conceptual reflection; (6) psychic reflection; and (7) theoretical reflection. The last three levels refer to critical reflection which is a process of reflecting on premises and assumptions that guide our action. Reflective learning becomes transformation when assumptions or premises are found to be invalid or distorted, resulting in new or transformed meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1990, 1991; Merriam & Clark, 1991).

Critical reflection is the central component to significant personal learning as outlined by Mezirow (1990), Brookfield (1987), Daloz (1986),

Keane (1985), and Merriam and Clark (1991). Mezirow (1990) suggests that:

> By far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection -- reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting. (p. 13)

Mezirow (1990) suggests that the extent to which an individual can critically self-reflect influences the type and amount of learning that can occur from an experience. The individual's ability to reflect on prior learnings, assumptions and beliefs impacts the learning outcome.

Relevance for present study

Participants' ability to critically reflect upon their beliefs, assumptions, feelings, behaviours, experiences, and context greatly influenced the breadth and depth of their transformative learning experience. Though no attempt was made to develop a typology of reflective levels experienced by the participants, it was evident by their learning and subsequent actions that their ability to reflect was integral. The level of reflection that participants engaged in differed for each, however, it appears that each of Mezirow's (1981) seven level of reflective activity was engaged in by at least one

participant.

As suggested by Boud et al. (1985), participants reflected both on their cognitive and affective learning in order to ascribe meaning to their experiences. Analogous with Schon's (1983) ideas, participants reflected on the norms that guided their actions; on their patterns of behaviour; on their feelings; on their perspectives; and on their roles. For the two participants who chose to initiate their critical life events, reflective activity began before the event occurred. For all participants, the majority of reflection occurred following the event itself.

Merely reflecting on the critical life event and its obvious impact did not appear sufficient to prompt the transformative learning that occurred for the participants. It was the understanding gained through reflecting upon their basic foundations of self that enhanced the intensity of their significant personal learning.

Again, a contextual perspective must be maintained regarding the participants' reflective activities. Their social and cultural contexts along with their support networks appeared to enhance their levels of reflection. Five of the participants attribute a great deal of their learning to the process of engaging in professional counselling, for which reflective activity was integral. Likewise, the reflective abilities of the three college students appeared to have been enhanced through curriculum activities designed to promote reflection. The ability to reflect appears to be a skill that can be

taught and enhanced through coaching and/or structured guidance.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Research Summary

The transformative learning experiences of six adults was the focus of this study. Critical life events acted as triggers for a learning process that involved reflecting upon personal beliefs, values, goals, and feelings, as well as on the social, cultural and political contexts in which the participants lived. The impact of the critical life event and personal learnings were apparent within six different life spheres for each participant.

A summary of the research methodology employed in this study, the findings of the research, the implications for research and practice, and personal reflections have been included within this chapter.

Research Methodology

In order to capture and attempt to understand the transformative learning experiences of the six adults who participated, a socio-contextual perspective of learning and development emerged within this study. A descriptive qualitative research design was initially employed. Through the use of critical incident forms and personal interviews, insights, perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and learning were gathered from the participants. Each participant completed a written description of his/her critical life event and

subsequent learning, as well as engaged in three personal interviews with the researcher. Upon completion of the first round of interviews, a growing sense of unease was experienced by the researcher, who began questioning the validity of being solely responsible for interpreting and analyzing the incoming data. Large amounts of data were being amassed, and the legitimacy of interpreting this data through only one individual's meaning perspectives (that of the researcher) seemed inappropriate. The researcher was well aware of how her personal, career and academic experiences could colour the data and influence the analysis process.

At this point in the process, a participatory approach to the collection and analysis of data was incorporated. Areas to be examined within the interviews were suggested by the participants and integrated into the collection process. Emerging themes and categories were taken back to each participant and discussed at the start of subsequent interview. Through a process of dialogue, the six phase learning process as outlined in this study, emerged. The phases, the sequencing of the learning process, and the use of continuums to structure the process arose from these discussions. As well, the six life spheres that were affected were identified by the participants themselves.

As the analysis continued, if contradictions arose, the participants were re-contacted either by phone or in person. Likewise, a draft of the analysis chapters was circulated to each participant to allow for feedback

and discussion.

What began as a descriptive qualitative research design, ended as a participatory design. In incorporating a participatory element, the ability to honour the data and give justice to the diverse and varied experiences of the participants was enhanced. In retrospect, this topic would have benefitted from a legitimate participatory research design where the participants were involved in gathering data, designing interviewing questions etc.

Six participants, two males (31 and 35 years of age) and four females (29 - 47 years old) were selected to participate in this study. All six were enrolled in post secondary studies at the time the study commenced and had experienced a critical life event prior to 1991.

Commonalities existed amongst the participants prior to their critical life event that are noteworthy. Demographic similarities are as follows: five of the six participants were married with children; four were in their thirties; and five had completed at least a high school education. In addition, all six of the participants used similar words in describing themselves and their life prior to their event: isolated; not in touch with feelings; other-directed; low self-esteem; caretaker; suppressed aspects of self; responsible for others; "just going through the motions"; unhappy; couldn't acknowledge vulnerabilities; required outside validation; naive; and, played out ascribed roles without question. This description of self was created retrospectively.

Participants generally agreed that had they been asked to describe themselves prior to their critical life event, they would have given a different, more positive description.

Summary of Research Findings

In reviewing and reflecting upon the findings of this study, five theoretical suppositions arose. I have chosen to summarize the research findings using these suppositions as categories.

1. Transformative learning experiences comprise six phases which include: disorientation; emotional and/or physical reaction; building connections; journey into self; reaffirmation of self; and, contextual awareness. These learning experiences impact six separate life spheres including: significant relationships; work; leisure; spirituality; health and community.

The participants' experiences were captured in a six phase transformative learning process, impacting and in turn, being impacted by, six life sphere for each participant. The first phase of Disorientation was identified as one of shock and denial, followed quickly by the second phase of Emotional/Physical Reaction. Intense emotional reactions prompted the process of reaching out to the environment surrounding the individual in search of empathy, support, answers and guidance. This involved both

family and friends as well as community support services.

In the Building Connections phase, each participant connected with either a support group or professional counselling that encouraged reflection upon roles, expectations, assumptions, values, and feelings that guided his/her actions. This exploration process focused on personal beliefs about self within the context of their upbringing and past or present relationships. For each participant, reflecting upon self and context was seen as an important step in the process of personal learning.

An emphasis was placed on the role of "other" during this phase of the process. Participants believed that the answers existed with others, and not within themselves. Additionally, they felt that many of their assumptions and beliefs were unconscious, which began to surface when challenged and prompted by others. A general belief existed that this process could not have occurred in isolation from others.

During the phase of Journey into Self, each participant struggled with the question, "Who am I separate from others?" The influences of their social, cultural and political environments in the formation of their beliefs were examined. In particular, the ascribed cultural and social roles and expectations that impacted each participant was explored and challenged. As the participants struggled with this phase of the process, they did so within the context of their environments, which in turn reacted to the struggle. The impact was most apparent within personal relationships -- the

changing thoughts, feelings and actions of the participants resulted in changed relationships. The support and guidance received during this phase of the process was seen as being crucial in promoting healthy progress.

With the support of others and through personal reflection, participants entered the phase of Reaffirmation of Self. During this phase a growing sense of self as separate and unique began to emerge. Roles were redefined. Answers existed within, as opposed to residing with others. Personal assumptions and beliefs were changed to accommodate an increasingly flexible, integrated, expansive and inclusive meaning perspective. Participants began to explore and validate their affective sides. Priorities changed to incorporate higher order values which were reflected in a changed lifestyle. Personal relationships became a priority; work took on a sense of meaning versus a means of achieving economic rewards; a search for spiritual understanding was undertaken; emotional and physical health became a priority, represented in changed leisure emphasis, and; a broader sense of community emerged. These learnings had a tremendous impact on the participants' personal environments, which in turn shaped and moulded the outcomes of the learning process.

As the participants began to think and feel differently about themselves, changes in their perception of the world in general occurred. The participants shared how their perception of themselves was reflected

in their perception of their environment. The final phase of the learning process was described as developing a new understanding of the contexts in which they operated. With a renewed sense of self and personal power, participants began developing a critical perspective of the social, cultural and political influences which impacted their lives. Structures that had previously been taken-for-granted such as educational and medical institutions, the legal system, and capitalism in general, were reflected on for the first time, and in some cases challenged. A growing sense of the participants' ability to impact these structures and taken-for-granted beliefs developed.

2. An inter-relationship exists between cognitive and affective learning within transformative learning experiences. Affective learning is required in order for cognitive learning to be consolidated and acted upon.

The critical life events acted as a trigger for reflection on emotionally laden meaning perspectives. For the participants, transformative learning incorporated learning about feelings and cognitive beliefs which were viewed as being intermeshed and difficult to separate. Beliefs formed about self included how one feels, what one thinks, and what one aspires to. Corresponding, both affective and cognitive learning was required in order for a change to occur in how the participants saw themselves and how they behaved. Cognition alone, did not appear to guide action. Rather,

participants continually stated how they would revert to old ways of being and acting until they were able to work through the emotions and feelings associated with an old meaning perspective. Cognitively changing these perspectives appeared to be only the first step in the learning process.

3. Transformative learning experiences are social processes of learning, involving an inter-dependent relationship between the individual and his/her social, cultural, and political environments. This relationship is reciprocal and reactive, influencing the learning experiences and outcomes.

The data from this study suggests that the transformative learning process that the participants engaged in, was social in nature; that an inter-dependent relationship existed between the participants and their context. This relationship was both reciprocal and reactive -- impact in one was felt by the other. Although individual processes occurred, to limit the learning to an internal process distorts the meaning and relevance of the experience. Just as a contextual social perspective is held in understanding the formation of an individual's meaning perspective, so must the same perspective be maintained in understanding transformative learning experiences. Learning of this nature appears to be context bound. The environment interacts with the individual to help shape and mould the learning outcome. Support, empathy, guidance, opportunities and barriers become crucial elements of the learning process.

Adopting a social perspective on learning influences how one views the formation and reformation of meaning perspectives. The participants in this study felt that many of the meaning perspectives that guided their action had been socially ascribed and uncritically assimilated. The majority of those that were found to be "distorted" were meaning perspectives regarding socially ascribe roles and beliefs that were no longer appropriate or functional for the participant.

Gender differences were evident in terms of which traditional roles were ascribed to them. The females in the study felt they had generally adopted the role of caretaker, ensuring that the needs of others were met. They had little awareness of their own needs as energy was directed outside themselves. The men in the study put all the energies into accomplishments either through work or school. They viewed their success as being defined by whether they could attain a good job, house, family, and material possessions. Their role was to provide and success was measured against external criteria. Likewise, the two men in the study had little sense of who they were apart from their achievements. While the participants in this study also experienced the process of changing individual meaning perspectives (beliefs about "self"), the hardest struggles occurred when the participants began to question and challenge social meaning perspectives (beliefs about "self in the world").

While social context shapes and defines meaning perspectives, it is

also only within this context that existing meaning perspectives can be examined and redefined. Socialization plays an unprecedented role in the ongoing growth and development of adults.

4. The development of an individual's sense of self plays a central role in transformative learning experiences.

Participants continually made reference to an increased sense of self, and attributed their transformative learning experiences and resulting life changes to an increase in self awareness. When the participants were asked to define "self", the answer addressed the "Who am I?" question. They described understanding self as involving an exploration of the following: What do I believe in? What do I value in my life? What am I feeling at any given time? Why do certain situations provoke certain emotions? What are the roots of certain personal beliefs and feelings? How were my values and beliefs formed, and how do they influence my behaviour? What are my personal goals and priorities? What roles do I play and why? (etc, etc).

Participants stated that as children they were not taught to explore or question various life perspectives or life choices. Meaning perspectives regarding their place and purpose in life were uncritically assimilated. These were formed in childhood, acting as filters through which they attached meaning to their experiences as adults, and for the most part,

remained unchallenged. As adult, participants felt they were rewarded for maintaining the status quo and for fulfilling "ascribed" roles and goals. The participants felt they lived through others, and were directed by others, eventually losing touch with their own personal feelings and desires. Their critical life event provided an opportunity to stop and reflect upon the meaning perspectives that guided their actions. The long and difficult process of self awareness became a personal priority for all the participants. Knowing and honouring self, and acting with integrity was identified as a major component in the ongoing development of the participants.

5. The ability to critically reflect upon one's self and the social, cultural and political context has a direct impact in the outcome of transformative learning experiences.

What continually emerged as a technique for initiating, engaging in, and enhancing transformative learning experiences was the participants' ability to reflect upon themselves and their contexts. Community and professional support services provided an invaluable role in encouraging and supporting this personal reflection. In addition, various friends, family, workshops, and resource materials assisted in promoting reflection for each participant.

When reference is made to the participants' past description of

themselves prior to their critical life event, what quickly becomes apparent is that not one of the participants would have considered themselves the least bit reflective. The reflective abilities were learned through structured exercises, coaching, and practice. Clearly, some of the most significant learning undertaken in adulthood for these participants was enabled through the process of critical reflection. The ability to reflect was not innate rather was a skill taught and reinforced through practice.

Once having learned to self-reflect, participants generalized this learning to other contexts. The development of increased self awareness and a sense of personal power enabled the participants to develop a critically reflective perspective of the environments in which they lived. They began to question and challenge taken-for-granted beliefs and ways of behaving both within their personal lives and within their social, cultural, and political contexts.

Implications for Further Research

Understanding the transformative learning experiences of adults has only recently begun to be explored. Unanswered questions requiring further research arise in several areas. This section suggests areas that require further research as they relate to research sample demographics and to the theoretical suppositions that arose from this study.

Sample Demographics

The outcome of qualitative research is dependent on the sample used for the study. Further research is required into what extent transformative learning experiences are influenced by the following demographic variables: age; gender; educational level; socio-economic level; timing of critical life events; and types of critical life events.

1. Age: Six adults participated in the study ranging in age from 29 years to 47 years old. Three of the participants were in their 30s at the time of the study. While no obvious age related differences were evident in the amount or type of learning that resulted from the critical life event, more research would be beneficial regarding the connection between age and transformative learning experiences.

Of interest to the researcher was the fact that of the 15 individuals that completed the critical incident form (screening phase of the study), almost all were in their 30s or 40s. Do individuals experience more critical life events in their 30s and 40s that may act as triggers for significant learning? Do older adults experience transformative learning experiences as they begin to experience more loss?

2. Gender: Four females and two males were selected as part of the sample. An equal division of males and females had been the initial intent of the researcher however based on the criteria used for selection, the present distribution was most appropriate. Gender differences did

appear in the type of social and cultural roles and expectations that were challenged as part of the transformative experience. Otherwise, gender differences did not appear to greatly influence the amount or the type of data collected.

Gender differences as they relate to transformative learning were not the main focus of this study. The majority of the research on significant personal learning today has been undertaken with female participants. Questions remain unanswered as to whether real gender differences do exist as to the frequency and nature of significant personal learning experiences.

3. Educational level: All participants were enroled in a post secondary institution within the city of Edmonton at the time of the selection of the sample. Three diploma students from Grant MacEwan Community College; two undergraduates in science programs at the University of Alberta; and one PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the university. One of the undergraduate students withdrew from university studies midway through the collection of data.

The educational level attained by any one participant did not appear to greatly influence the data collected, however the curriculum the participants were exposed to may have assisted in enhancing personal learning. The three diploma students from Grant MacEwan college were readily able to identify and discuss their assumptions, roles and beliefs as

they related to their life event. Each identified having to complete personal awareness exercises as part of the curriculum in his/her program, hence the possibility of these exercises having enhanced his/her personal learning. More research would be required in this area to determine whether post secondary curriculum could enhance personal learning associated with a significant life event. Likewise, do differences exist between educational levels and the type and amount of significant personal learning?

4. Socio--economic level: All of the participants were raised within middle class families, five of the participants would still consider themselves living a middle class life style. One participant's life style would be considered lower middle class. The extent to which socio-economic level influences the type and depth of transformative learning could not be ascertained by this study. Certainly, a recognizable benefit for the participants of this study was their financial ability to access both professional counselling and return to pursue post secondary studies. Socio-economic levels may also influence the opportunities and choices available to individuals struggling with life events or transitions. Additional research is required in order to explore the influence socio-economic levels may have on transformative learning experiences.

5. Timing of the Critical Life Event: All individuals chosen to participate in the study had experienced their life event prior to 1991. A minimum of one year lapsed to allow for reflection and integration of

personal learning.

One event occurred in the late 70s, while the majority occurred in the late 80s or 1990. The relative recency of the events may have prompted the participants to volunteer for the study as the events and learning were still very prominent and significant in their lives. All participants considered themselves still immersed in the process of learning, indicating that the learning process has not been completed. No clear differences existed between those events that occurred earlier compared to the more recent events. The researcher's expectation that the time lapsed since the event would correlate positively with the amount of personal learning achieved, was not substantiated. The intensity of the event and resulting impact appeared to have had more influence on learning than the timing of the event. Further research is required to explore questions such as the following: To what extent does the timing of a critical life event in an adult's life influence the likelihood of transformative learning occurring? Do certain life cycle phases set the stage for transformative learning experiences?

6. Critical Life Events: The participants' critical life events could all be considered relationship-based, involving the loss of a significant relationship through death or separation/divorce or the gaining of a new relationship. Two participants, one male and one female, had experienced a separation/divorce; two female participants had experienced a death in the family; one male participant experienced the loss of a relationship

through rejection; and one female experienced the gaining of a relationship through spiritual revival.

Minimal differences existed between those events that were externally initiated and those that were initiated by the participant themselves. The only difference that surfaced in this study was that when the participants themselves initiated the event they tended to begin the learning process at phase two as opposed to phase one. No other clear differences could be ascertained between the events and resulting learning. The intensity of the event versus the type of event appeared to determined the resulting learning and impact.

Research into the relationship between types of critical life events and resulting learning is required. Do terminally ill adults undergo transformative learning experiences? How closely related is the learning resulting from a grieving process or a near death experience and that outlined in this study? How can learning from either a normative or non-normative life event be enhanced? What variables must either be present or missing for transformative learning to result from a life event? Does the heightened emotional component of certain critical life events enhance the depth of personal learning that occurs? Are relationship-based critical events more likely to trigger transformative learning than other types of events?

Theoretical Suppositions

The learning process and suppositions that arose from this study require further research. Each of these areas are briefly outlined.

1. Transformative learning involves a six phase learning process which impacts six life spheres: Further research is required regarding the six phases outlined in this research. In addition, while the impact within each sphere varied for the participants, all participants experienced the greatest amount of learning and change in the life sphere of significant relationships. Further research is required into the impact of transformative learning experiences and the role significant relationships play in this learning process.

2. The inter-relationship between cognitive and affective learning within transformative learning experiences: Research is required to further understand and explore the relationship between cognitive and affective learning and the transformation of meaning perspectives.

Both individual and social meaning perspectives were examined by the participants, resulting in either a reaffirmation or transformation of existing perspectives. Exploring individual meaning perspectives involved examining thoughts and feelings about "self". Exploring social meaning perspectives involved examining those beliefs and values dictated by the society in which the participants lived, particularly in relation to "self within the world". For the participants in this study, the process of redefining or

transforming social meaning perspectives were experienced as highly emotional and controversial, yet, also proved to have the highest degree of personal impact. Further research is required to explore the relationship between social meaning perspective, individual meaning perspectives and transformative learning experiences.

As participants progressed in their learning process, changes in their values, goals and priorities occurred. Prior to their critical life events, all of the participants stated that they had adopted strong materialistic values -- pursuing goals that would provide them with monetary rewards &/or social recognition from their peers. A sense of worth was connected with the amount of money they made, the type of car they drove, where they lived, and the image they presented to the community. For each participant, values and priorities changed to emphasize the non-material aspects of life: family; personal relationships; self development; general life experiences. For many theorists in the field of adult development, particularly Maslow, these would be considered higher order values. Research into the connection between transformative learning experiences, adult development, and higher order values would prove insightful.

3. <u>The inter-dependent relationship between the individual and his/her social, cultural and political environments:</u> The transformative learning experiences in this study occurred within and were shaped by the contexts of the participants. Five of the participants were of anglo-saxon

descent living in predominantly white, middle class communities. One participant was of east Indian descendent. All participants would describe themselves as being immersed within the dominant culture, adopting its values and norms. To what extent does the environment in which an individual lives, impact potential transformative learning experiences? Does cultural, ethnic, or political differences influence the outcome of these experiences? Does an individual's perception of available options and opportunities impact personal learning experiences?

Additionally, each of the participants were able to develop a network that supported and assisted his/her learning process. Research undertaken from a psychological perspective commonly identifies a supportive network as being essential during times of crisis. To what extent does a support network influence transformative learning experiences? And conversely, would adults lacking a support network experience a similar process of learning?

Participants acknowledged that having developed a critically reflective stance regarding their personal beliefs, feelings, and actions, they began to question and examine the contexts in which they lived. For five of the participants, becoming self reflective was required in order to become critically reflective of social context. Further research that explores the relationship between becoming critically self reflective and developing a critical social conscience is required.

4. The central role that self awareness plays in transformative learning experiences: An increased sense of self was responsible for initiating the changes that occurred in the participants' various life spheres. Becoming aware of the meaning perspectives that guided their behaviour; getting in touch with their emotions and learning to express them appropriately; understanding the influence of their social, cultural and political environments; and re-priorizing goals and values, all aided in the development of a strong sense of self. Developing self awareness through reflection, allowed participants to redirect their lives in order to live with integrity and congruency. This was seen as the most important component of the participants' transformative learning experience. Further research is required in order to explore the connection between the development of a sense of self and transformative learning experiences.

5. Role of reflection in transformative learning experiences: The ability to reflect on self and context was fundamental in the participants' learning process. Further research into the correlation between an individual's ability to engage in various levels of reflection and the resulting impact on their transformative learning experiences would be beneficial. Additionally, research into techniques and ways of enhancing reflective abilities is required.

Implication for Adult Education Practice

At the time of data collection, all six of the participants in this study were enrolled in post secondary studies. Two of the participants had been enrolled in academic studies, one as a PhD candidate and one as an undergraduate students, prior to their critical life event. The remaining four participants choose to return to school, three as diploma students and one as an undergraduate, as a result of their critical life event. While exploring the impact of their critical life event on their work life sphere, the participants began sharing their experiences of returning to school as adult learners.

Each of the participants acknowledged that academic environments create certain barriers for adult students. A common agreement existed that other aspects of a student's life is often not acknowledged within the halls of academia. The emphasis on academic history overshadows all other prior life experiences. Little consideration is given to the multiple roles of adults.

Research is revealing that the majority of adult students returning to school do so as a result of some transition in their life. In order to enhance adult students' academic and personal experiences while in school, the following considerations were identified jointly by the researcher and the participants of this study:

1. Recognize the value of developing curriculum that incorporates exploration and reflection on personal life experiences. Personal life experiences were acknowledged by the participants in this study to lead to the most significant learning experiences in adulthood. Integrating personal life experiences into academic curriculum could enhance the educational experiences within post secondary institutions. The community college programs appear to be further advanced in this area than the university. The practical versus academic focus of the college setting appears to more readily incorporate this type of programming.

2. Incorporate activities and exercises that would enhance students' reflective abilities. As was suggested by this study, reflective abilities can be developed and enhanced through coaching and structured activities. The development of reflective abilities benefits the adult student both academically and personally.

3. Accessible student counselling services that are sensitive to needs of adult students. The transition of becoming a student often raises personal, social and career issues that need to be addressed by the adult student. The participants in this study experienced barriers in attempting to access student counselling services. One university student was told by a university student counsellor that adult students do not belong in a university setting and would be wiser to go the community college or technical institute route. College students found counselling services

difficult to access as service was only available at the same time as classes were scheduled.

4. Reduce the emphasis on academic competitiveness to allow for innovative programming and project work. The participants of this study were often motivated by factors other than academic achievement. Their degree or diploma was not the goal of returning to school, rather was viewed as an avenue to enhance personal learning. This corresponds with the shift in their values and priorities as a result of their life event -- a shift to more higher order values. An externally imposed emphasis on grading and accountability limited the educational experiences of the participants.

5. Readily accessible information regarding program options, conferences, and services available to adult students. Other responsibilities of adult students limit the amount of informal networking they can engage in. Often it is through informal networks that students learn about relevant information that would assist them in their academic careers. Structured and available information networks are required to ensure that necessary information is communicated to adults students.

6. Acknowledge the intrinsic connection between adult learning and adult development. Learning that incorporates affective and cognitive components assists in adult development. Post secondary institutions are in an unique position to enhance overall development of adults, however, in order to do so, the exclusive focus on cognitive learning must be re-

examined.

7. Flexible scheduling of courses to more readily accommodate other responsibilities of adult students. In the college setting, this was a particular concern as classes are scheduled throughout the entire day and attendance is recorded in several programs. Offering alternative course scheduling may more appropriately meet the needs of adult students.

Reflections

Through the process of doing research I have become acutely aware of how educational research, both quantitative and qualitative design, can be manipulated, directed, guided, influenced by one's conscious and unconscious beliefs and assumptions. Each step of the research process is guided by assumptions regarding: (1) the relevance of educational research; (2) topic considered meaningful enough to research; (3) knowledge and how it is created; (4) method of doing research; (5) identification and selection of sample population; (5) what questions are asked and which are not; (6) method of conducting interviews; (7) the environment in which interviews took place; (8) stance of researcher (expert vs facilitator); (9) who is involved in the collection and analysis of the data; (10) which data is considered relevant and which is not; (11) how data is categorized; (12) and what analysis, conclusions, and implications are drawn from the data. It is not enough is become aware of our assumptions

about the topic of interest, as our beliefs about gender, non verbal and verbal communication, denotive and connotative meaning, disclosure, environment, culture, and our own life experiences influence the collection, analysis and written product of our research. What one focuses on, the emphasis attached to it, verbal and nonverbal cues of acceptance, what one chooses to elaborate on or question further, and most important what is ignore and not focused on, or not asked, determines the very essence of one's research.

Although I was aware of these influences prior to commencing my research, and attempted to list my conscious beliefs surrounding the topic, I did not fully appreciate the influence of unconscious biases and assumptions. As the research process continued, unconscious biases began to surface and were recorded and reflected upon in my journal. I have become astutely aware of how all information is filtered through the meaning perspectives of the researcher, where it runs the risk of being distorted and misinterpreted. Questions and statements which are transmitted to the participant are loaded with the researcher's own assumptions and theoretical framework; and that which is received by the researcher is filtered through and interpreted according to his/her meaning perspectives.

It is a courageous attempt on the part of the researcher to reflect upon, identify, record and suspend biases and assumptions that may

influence the research process. However, given that so many of our assumptions are unconscious, suspending beliefs and biases is something we can only strive for.

I am left with an appreciation of the rigour involved in "quality" qualitative research, and I'm aware of the shortcoming within this particular research project. If I can extend any insights to my able colleagues who will follow, it is to set time aside up front in the planning process of your research to reflect upon and record any and all biases and assumptions that may guide your research: your personal motivation; choice of topic; choice of methodology; role of researcher; context of study; choice of sample; research timelines; focus of study; questions that are asked and those left unasked; gender issues; personal life experiences etc. This process is best done with a partner who is able to challenge the researcher to explore the "why" question at each level of insight. Although, the time and energy required to reflect on these issues may seem frivolous, I believe the process is necessary if one is to engage in quality research. The process of attempting to identify some of my inherent assumptions enhanced my reflection and identification of beliefs that may otherwise have remained outside my conscious awareness.

The experience of engaging in this type of research has been a powerful personal learning experience for myself. I would like to extend a thank you to the participants for sharing so openly and honestly, and for

challenging me to view experiences and behaviour from multiple perspectives.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANTS REQUIRED FOR RESEARCH STUDY

Have you experienced major changes in your relationships, work or family that have made a real impact on your life? Can you identify experiences or events in your adult life that were especially meaningful, significant or intense for you?

If you are interested in reflecting back upon an experience in your life that was personally significant, and would like to gain more understanding about your own learning, personal growth and development that resulted, I would love to hear from you. The information gathered will be incorporated into a thesis written for a Masters degree in Adult Education.

Only five hours of your time is required over the next term. Participants will engage in confidential personal interviews with the researcher, with complete anonymity guaranteed. This experience will provide you with an opportunity to further your own personal learning and will add to the growing body of research on adult learning and development.

Please contact Karen Sveinunggaard at 458 - 0090 (home) if you are interested or require more information. Thank you for your interest.

APPENDIX B

CRITICAL INCIDENT REPORT

Think back over your adult life and identify one life event or life experience (or a series of life events or experiences), that was especially meaningful, significant or intense for you. Select a life event that occurred prior to 1990, if possible. Take no more than 15 minutes to complete this report. Keep your description brief and concise. Please describe the following characteristics of your chosen life event:

(a) Describe the life event itself -- what occurred? When? Was it expected or unexpected? Positive or negative?

(b) What did you learn from the life event?

(c) What impact has this event had on your life?

(d) Why is this life event particularly significant for you? Please describe its significance.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Life Event

1. When you think back over your adult life, what life event or experience was particularly significant or intense for you? Describe the event.

a. Would you consider this a positive or negative event? Why?

b. Was this event expected or unexpected? Sudden onset or gradual?

c. Was this event initiated by yourself or by someone or something external to you?

2. What makes this event significant for you?

Learning from life event

1. What did you learn from the experience? Examples.

a. What did you learn about yourself? Others? The world in general?

b. What did you learn about your feelings and emotions?

c. What did you learn about the way you think about yourself?

d. What did you learn about the role you play in significant relationships?

e. What did you learn about what you value in life? What your priorities are? What your goals are? Did these change?

Impact of Life event

1. Did any significant outcomes/changes occur, if so what were they? Examples.

a. Did the learning result in changes in your attitudes? decisions? behaviours?

b. Has how you see yourself changed as a result of the life event?

c. Has how do you feel about yourself changed?

d. How were your roles changed by the life event or the learning that resulted?

e. Did your values, goals or priorities change?

2. What areas of your life were impacted by the life event? How? Examples.

a. Were all areas of your life effected? Did actual changes in one areas effect other areas of your life?

b. Did changes in how you felt or thought about one area of your life effect other areas?

c. What impact did the learning from the life event have on significant relationships?

d. How did the life event or resulting learning impact your work?

Lasting Impact

1. Would you consider the learning &/or changes that resulted had a short or long term effect on your life? Can you give me an example?

a. What aspects of your life changed only for a short period of time until the initial impact of the event was over, and then "returned to normal"? Were these attitudes? feelings? behaviours?

b. What lasting impact has resulted that effects you today? Are these attitudes? feelings? behaviours? priorities? goals?

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to participant in this study. The intent of this form is to outline the purpose of the study, the parameters it will guide the research, and your rights as participants.

The focus of this study is the learning that results from a significant life event experienced as an adult. The life event itself will be briefly explored, it's significance to you, any learning or changes that resulted, and any lasting impact it has on you today. Six individuals will be selected to engage in the study.

There are three components that you will be asked to participate in. First, you will be asked to complete a written Critical Incident Form approximately one to two pages describing the life event and it's impact on you. Second, you will be asked to participate in three personal interviews, lasting approximately 1.0 hour each, with the researcher. The interviews will be audiotaped and a written transcript will be provided to you after each interview. The researcher will be reading the transcripts and identifying themes and trends that emerge. These will also be shared with you for verification and accuracy. Third, you will be asked to write down any insights, perception, feelings or thoughts that may come to mind in between the three interviews. These can either to shared verbally with the researcher at the next interview or be provided in writing.

All information collected will be confidential and any reference to your name, where you work or live will be changed to protect your anonymity. Phrases &/or sentences from the interview transcripts will be included in the final written thesis document, however again, no reference will be made to you personally.

The following have been outlined as your rights as a participant in this study:

1. You may decline to answer any question during an interview that you do not feel comfortable addressing. Due to the potential emotional component of the subject we will be discussing, please be advised that both pleasant and unpleasant feelings associated with the life event may reappear during the interviews. If you do not feel comfortable discussing any of these with the researcher, feel free to decline.

2. You may stop the interview at any time you feel you do not want to proceed.

3. You may withdraw from the study at any time you feel you no longer want to be involved.

4. You will be assured anonymity regarding all the information you provide to the researcher.

5. You will be provided with transcripts of all the interviews you participate in and will also receive a copy of the analysis of all the data collected for the study.

Thank you again for taking the time to engage in this study. Hopefully this experience will be as valuable a learning experience for you as it will be for me. Look forward to seeing you soon.

Karen Sveinunggaard

_____
Name

_____
Signature of Participant

_____
Address

_____
Signature of Researcher

_____

_____
Home Phone

_____
Work Phone